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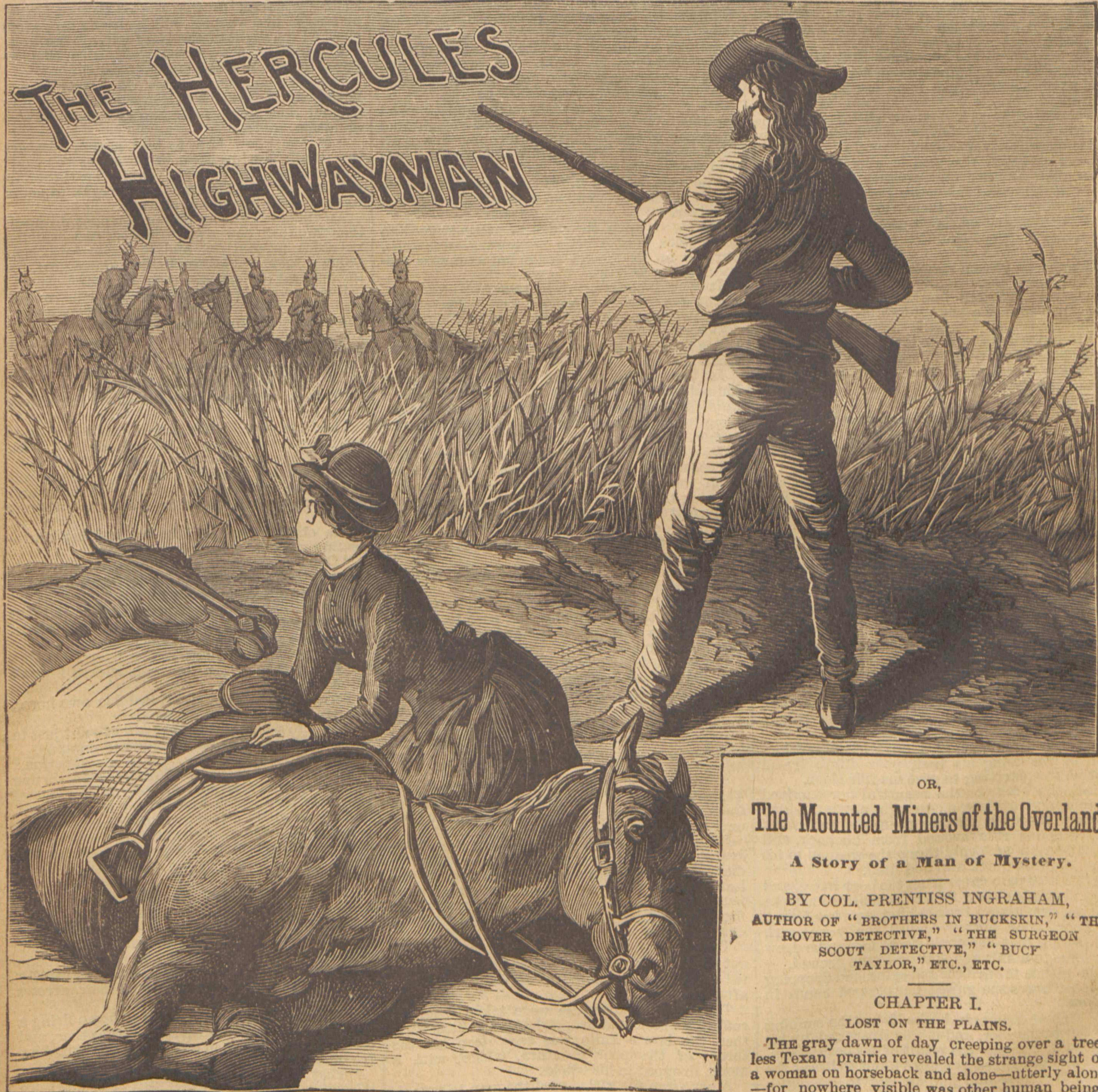
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"PROTECT THE WEAK AGAINST THE STRONG IS A TEXAN'S MOTTO!" WAS THE BRAVE FELLOW'S ANSWER.

OR,
The Mounted Miners of the Overland.

A Story of a Man of Mystery.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BROTHERS IN BUCKSKIN," "THE
ROVER DETECTIVE," "THE SURGEON
SCOUT DETECTIVE," "BUCK
TAYLOR," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

LOST ON THE PLAINS.

THE gray dawn of day creeping over a treeless Texan prairie revealed the strange sight of a woman on horseback and alone—utterly alone—for nowhere visible was other human being, though behind her horse a few lengths away trotted a dozen gaunt, hungry wolves, as though

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their instinct told them that their prey was almost in their cruel clutch.

As the dawn faded from gray into a ruddy hue it showed that the horse was sweat-stained, hung his head low with fatigue, and went along like an animal whose powers of endurance were almost gone, and yet whose spirit kept him a faithful friend and servitor to his rider.

And the rider?

A mere girl, for she could scarcely have passed her fifteenth year.

Her form, however, was matured and graceful, and the riding-habit of dark blue fitted her well, though it appeared well worn, while the black slouch hat she wore failed to hide the masses of red-bronze hair which had escaped from its comb and fell in a mass upon the back of her horse.

The face, in spite of its paleness and look of almost despair, was beautiful.

It had a hunted look, too, and as she turned her gaze from time to time back upon the following wolves, she would shudder, as though realizing the appalling, threatening fate that must be hers when her good steed should fail her utterly.

"Heaven have mercy! I am lost, lost! for nowhere is the train in sight, nowhere is there a single break of timber in this sea-like prairie, and my poor horse is almost used up."

She gave another long glance around the prairie, and then, with a quick, furtive look at the wolves, buried her face in her hands and seemed almost overcome.

For some time she remained thus, but a low whinny from her horse caused her to look up, and at once a cry broke from her lips, a cry of alarm.

The wolves were bad enough, being out on the prairie was terrible, but, what her eyes now beheld was worse, far worse.

Over a rise in the prairie appeared a horseman, then another and another until a score were in sight, and they were Indians!

The wolves scented them, their natural foes, and, with angry snarls at their driving them from their prey, skulked away in the long grass.

Her horse gave a startled neigh, pricked up his ears and seemed anxious to fly, for his instinct seemed to tell him that his fair young rider had to face a more terrible danger now, than ever.

"If you will go, poor fellow, go and save me, for heaven's sake; but, it seems only a prolonging of my fate and greater suffering for you, tired out as you are.

"But go!"

The horse had suddenly become revived with the sight of the Indians, and with the word of encouragement from his rider bounded away over the rolling prairie.

With terrific yells the red-skins came on, and glancing back, with a look of joy upon her face the young girl saw that her horse was holding his own.

But the effort could not be kept up long, the pace was too great, and the Indians soon began to creep up, one, mounted upon a handsome clay-bank with silver mane and tail, coming on rapidly and dropping the others, now strung out in a line, according to the speed of their respective ponies, far behind.

This warrior came on at a pace, which a glance behind her, told the maiden, must bring him alongside of her before another half of a mile was gone over.

She looked ahead, and could only see the treeless prairie, and a rise, some quarter of a mile away, seemed to shut out her vision.

But the horse struggled on, without urging, and he was doing his best, poor dumb friend that he was, striving to save his fair rider.

Still the brave on the beautiful horse gained rapidly, and at last, as though not willing to continue the chase further than was necessary, he swung his rifle around from his back, and drawing rein suddenly threw the weapon to his shoulder, took quick aim and fired.

A snort of pain came from the poor horse, and the girl at once knew that he was hit, though he held on, dragging a broken hind leg after him.

"Poor, poor horse!" sighed the young girl, and feeling that she could do no more, she drew the horse to a halt and sprung to the ground.

One glance toward the red-skins, and dropping upon her knees she raised her clasped hands in prayer.

A yell of triumph broke from the cunning warrior at his shot, and it was answered by his comrades, who saw the result of his deadly aim.

He had not aimed at the girl, but to break the leg of her horse and put an end to the flight, and his aim had been true.

He was now but fifty yards away, and coming on like the wind, triumphing over his prize now in his power.

But, suddenly, a shout came from behind the girl, and, with a startled cry, she sprung to her feet!

There, not fifty yards away, stood a man who had arisen from the prairie like an apparition. He held a rifle in his hand, the weapon that had just sent the brave to the happy hunting grounds, for the Indian had fallen dead from his horse.

And the animal, as though wishing to repay the young girl for the alarm his red master had given her, trotted directly up to her side!

"Catch the horse, miss, and come here to me!" came in the commanding voice of the one who had arisen like an apparition from the prairie.

CHAPTER II.

A TEXAN AT BAY.

The voice of the one who addressed the maiden was deep and commanding, and she obeyed the injunction quickly, for it came like an order to her.

Seizing the horse, and gathering her riding-habit about her, she ran to the spot where the man stood awaiting her, his rifle at a ready.

She, even in that moment of change from despair to hope, saw the one who had stood so boldly in the path of her pursuers, and marked his striking appearance.

He was a man of herculean frame, fully six feet four inches in height, with massive shoulders, a perfect physique, and that was clad in buckskin, with boots and slouch hat.

His face was bearded, not bald, handsome and resolute, and his eyes were strangely bright and piercing, while his dark hair hung down his back almost to his belt, in which were a bowie and two revolvers.

The rifle he had in his hand was an old-style Colt's repeating weapon with six shots, like a revolver.

He stood upon the edge of what seemed to have once been a little temporary earthwork, thrown up to protect some unfortunates surrounded by Indians.

It was something over two feet in depth, about ten feet in diameter, and had a ridge, a breastwork running around it a foot high, but which the tall grass concealed, so that the secret of his suddenly arising, as from out of the earth, was apparent.

In the pit lay a horse, a large, long-bodied animal, stretched out flat upon his side, while a saddle and bridle were near, and a blanket bed, from which the man had just arisen, was in one corner.

A coffee-pot and frying-pan, over a few burned sticks, evidently brought along for wood from the nearest timber, were also to be seen, showing that the man had had supper there, and slept in the little breastwork during the night.

All this the maiden took in almost at a glance, and then came the words:

"Sit there on my blankets, miss, while I secure this horse."

So saying he led the handsome Indian horse down into the pit, hopped him with the lariat, and, with an effort of his great strength, threw him flat upon his side!

"Now he is safe, and I'll see to the reds, and you had better lie close on this side, for arrows and bullets will begin to fly about here soon."

He spoke abruptly, but not unkindly, and the young girl obeyed implicitly, but said:

"Oh, sir, they are so many, you but one, and you must not sacrifice your life in trying to save mine."

"Protect the weak against the strong, is a Texan's motto. There are not over twenty of them, and that many I have stood off more than once before."

"I'll see if I can't get your outfit first, however," and he walked rapidly toward the Indians, who were still coming on, those in the lead halting until the others came up, for the boldness of the man, in not at once taking flight, caused them to think there were others in ambush.

Too late, however; they saw his intention to get the poor wounded horse, which the Hercules led up to the pit, unmindful of the arrows sent after him.

The bridle and saddle were taken from the suffering beast, and dropped into the little fort; then the bowie knife was sunk deep into the throat of the poor creature, which, with a moan, dropped in his tracks.

A cry from the girl caused the man to say:

"Had to do it, miss, to put him out of his

suffering, for his leg was broken, and the body will be a better breastwork for us—see."

"Oh, sir, how cruel this all is!"

"It seems so, but it isn't half as bad as it would have been had not that warrior's shot at your horse awakened me, for I was asleep, having come in late to camp here."

"But, here they come! Don't you be a bit uneasy, unless a stray shot gets me. If I do get hit, mount my horse and he'll take you to my home, which is yours, for I've got no one to leave it to."

The girl gazed at this splendid specimen of manhood thus talking of his death, in awe and silent admiration, and saw him throw his rifle to his shoulder and rapidly rattle forth shot after shot.

A wild cry broke from his lips, of defiance and triumph commingled, and yells of rage answered as the red-skins saw two of their braves and two ponies go down under the aim of their daring and deadly foe.

His shots also checked the charge of the Indians, who hastily retreated out of range, firing as they did so showers of arrows and several rifle-shots, for but few red-skins then had firearms.

The rifle of the first brave fallen they had been unable to get, so that was useless to them, and, as they retreated, the Texan followed slowly, to suddenly bound to the side of the dead chief and seize his weapon, which at long range had checked the flight of the girl fugitive's horse.

The Indians uttered wild yells, when they realized his act, and once more charged.

But he had reloaded his rifle, and running with great speed back to his retreat, sprung into it, and dropping the Indian's weapon and ammunition, said:

"If you know how to load a gun, miss, get this one in shooting trim as quickly as you can."

She seized the weapon, while he threw his rifle to his shoulder and again began to pump forth the deadly stream of lead.

An Indian fell from his horse, a pony dropped, then another one was wounded, yet still ten red-skins pressed on, and it began to look as though they would reach their daring foe, for the fire had not checked them thus far.

But, just as the last shot left the rifle, and it was fired with deliberate aim, a second report rung out, and the Texan started as he saw the young girl by his side just lowering the rifle from her shoulder.

Dropping his own rifle, he drew his revolvers, one in each hand, and said cheerily:

"Bravo, miss, you brought down the chief's horse that shot!"

Then his revolvers began to rattle, and once more the red-skins were checked, and fell back out of range, for the fire was too hot for them.

"Now, miss, I guess we can prepare to mount—just put my hat on your pretty head and watch those fellows while I look to matters here."

She obeyed him, and he reached her his repeating rifle, fully loaded.

"Don't show your sweet face, only my hat, please—that's it! Now I'll load up the Comanche's rifle, and it's a good one."

This he did, and then proceeded to put the maiden's bridle and saddle upon the dun horse.

"I guess you are a good rider, miss?"

"Yes, I can ride anything, sir."

"Good, then if the dun gets wicked I won't mind it."

Then he saddled and bridled his own horse, got together his traps, and said:

"Now to see what they are about—ah! just in time, for I expected they would surround us."

"Here's your hat, miss, and let me help you."

He placed her in her saddle as he spoke, sprung upon his own horse, and the two dashed out of the little fort which had served them so well, and rode swiftly away over the prairie just in time to avoid being surrounded by the red-skins, who were beginning to form a circle around them.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST CAMP.

THE wisdom of the Texan's act, in deserting his fort when he did, was shown from the fact that when he and his fair charge passed through the two lines of the Indians, which were rapidly encircling the little fortification, their arrows just fell short of them.

But they sped on like wind, the Texan firing a shot first on one side and then the other, and having the satisfaction of seeing a red-skin drop from his horse.

"They would have been too much for us, miss, if we had stayed in the little fort; but that dun of yours is a flyer, and keeps up with my

“splendidly, as you see, so we need have no fear of them now.”

“Ah, what do I not owe to you, sir, for you came like a good angel to me in the moment of my despair.”

“I am rather a healthy looking angel, miss; and it would puzzle a parson to find any wings about me; but I did get there, or rather you came to me, and I have to thank you for waking me up, or those Indians would have been having a picnic over me about now. So you see we are even.”

“It is kind of you to put it so; but I owe you more than life I am sure, and never can I forget you, so you have a warm place in my heart.”

“A great, big overgrown fellow like me, miss, in your little heart?”

“Why just think of it; but then you must tell me now how it is I find you alone on the prairie, for we can draw our horses down to a walk now, as the red-skins have given up the chase—see there!”

She glanced back at their foes, and saw that the two columns had come together and had halted, knowing that further pursuit was useless.

They all seemed to know what their comrades horse could do, and evidently had an idea that the Texan's steed was even speedier.

So they halted to look after their dead and wounded, leaving the prize they had coveted to go her way with her brave defender.

“Oh, sir, I am lost, for I got separated from the train two days ago, and lost my way in a pouring rain.”

“Poor child, and where were you going?”

“Over toward the Rio Grande country to settle, sir; my parents, two brothers and some negro servants.

“We are from Arkansas, and father was anxious to go to cattle-raising in Texas, so we started with all our belongings.

“I chased a fawn, two days ago, and got out of sight of the train, and then a storm came up and I could not find my way, and I would have died but for you.”

“Well, you are all right now, for I'll soon strike the trail of your train and overtake it; but had you a guide?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Had he reported any signs of Indians about?”

“Yes, sir, he said there were ‘signs’, as he called them, which he did not like, and I was wrong to go away from the train.”

“Just how many had you in the train?” and the Texan looked a trifle anxious.

“Father, my mother, two brothers, the guide and the negro servants, two of them men.”

“How old are your brothers?”

“Arthur is twenty, Robert seventeen, and I am fifteen.”

“Your father and brothers were good shots, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes, sir, father was an old army officer, and my brothers were raised upon the plantation in Arkansas.”

The Texan made no immediate reply, but as they neared a small stream said:

“Well, we will halt here for a rest and breakfast, for I have some fresh deer-meat along.”

He lifted her from her saddle, spread his blanket under a tree and staked the horses out, refusing to let her do anything to assist him, but telling her to rest.

Then he gathered some wood, built a fire and with fresh water from the stream set to work to boil coffee and get breakfast.

When all was ready he went to call her and found her fast asleep.

“She's a beauty and no mistake, and I only hope she'll have no great sorrow to bear between now and night; but, I'm anxious about her people, for the Comanches are certainly raising the Old Nick just now on the prairies.”

Calling her, she sprung to her feet in alarm, and yet laughed when she saw that she had no cause for fear.

Bathing her face at the stream she sat down and ate a hearty breakfast, for she was almost famished, and her protector was glad to see her enjoy the frugal fare.

“Now you just take a couple of hours' sleep, miss, for it will do you a world of good, while I fix up my traps and take a little look around for trails—now don't be afraid, for I won't go far.”

She obeyed him implicitly, and after looking carefully over his weapons, watering the horses and staking them in a fresh place to feed, he set off on foot to look about him.

He made a circuit of a mile, and came to a trail at which he halted.

“This is the trail of her train, for she said there were three wagons and an ambulance, with a few led horses.

“Here are the wagon-tracks, and the smaller ones of the ambulance, and also the hoofmarks of the led animals.

“I hope we will find all right and safe, and I guess we can catch them by night, for they cannot be over forty miles ahead.”

So saying the Texan walked rapidly back along the stream, the mile that lay between him and his camp.

Arriving there he found the maiden still asleep, and climbing the tallest of the group of trees he took a glass from his belt and made a careful survey of the prairie for miles around.

Then he descended to the ground and lay down and dropped to sleep, as though satisfied that no immediate danger was threatening them.

It was noon when he awoke, and he at once prepared dinner, from a deer he had shot that morning.

When all was ready he called the maiden, and she awoke perfectly rested and, when knowing what time it was said:

“You are so good to me, sir.”

Soon after dinner they mounted their horses, and, riding to the ford where the train had crossed the stream, the young girl recognized the spot, and said that they had camped just a few miles beyond there a few nights before.

“Yes, you doubtless wandered in a circle, and your people hardly travel over twenty miles a day, so we will overtake them by night,” said the Texan.

And so they started upon the trail, and pressing rapidly on as darkness fell upon the prairie they beheld a light ahead.

It looked like the steady glow of a large campfire, and rapidly they pushed on, the eyes of the man bent upon the fire and its surroundings, until, at last, as they drew near the Texan then said in a voice full of sympathy:

“My child, prepare for the worst, for yonder is the wreck of your train; the Comanches have overwhelmed them!”

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAST OF HER RACE.

A GROAN from the lips of the young girl, at the words of the Texan, told that she but too well understood him.

He saw that she was strong to bear, and so he sprang from his saddle and approached the fire.

Then he gazed about the scene for a moment, and his eyes took in all that there was to see.

The fire had become a mass of live coals only, but it gave a subdued light over all, that shone for some distance around the fatal spot.

The camp had been made in a clump of timber, where a generous spring bubbled up out of the ground, and there was thick chapparal upon the north to protect from the winds in that direction.

Here the Texan led the horses, and with his blankets made a bed for the girl.

“Lie there and get what rest you can,” he said, softly.

“And you?”

“I must keep my eyes open—nay, not a word, for I would do the same if I were alone.

“You rest, for you will need it, and I will look about and see if there is any hope left.

“There were how many, did you say?”

“Three wagons and an ambulance.”

“Yes, but how many people?”

“My parents and two brothers the guide and three servants.”

“Eight, all right; now do not worry too much.”

He was as gentle now as a woman, and having unsaddled the horses and staked them out, he went to the fire and gazed fixedly into it.

It had been a large fire, spreading over considerable space, and what had kindled it the muttered words of the Texan revealed:

“Yes, the ambulance and the wagons, with their contents which could not be carried off, have gone up in flame—yes, the charred wreckage shows that much.

“And, alas! there are other charred remains to show the fate of the unfortunates.

“Eight, she said,” and he began to stir up the fire with the pole of the ambulance, and to drag something out of it.

This he did for some time, and then went to see how his charge was.

She had wept herself to sleep, and making a circuit of the camp he found a number of wolves hanging about, so said:

“These fellows will warn me of any danger, so I can continue my work.

“If I could only find a shovel and spade—ha! this is lucky,” and he stumbled upon one where

one of the wagons had either been upset, or emptied of its contents.

And there were a couple of spades, a pick, shovel and other utensils.

Taking a rake he went back to the fire and finished his work of dragging out the charred remains of human beings, burned beyond all recognition, for the red-skins had thrown the bodies of their victims into the flames, along with the vehicles and other things they cared not to carry off.

“Eight, she said, and here they are,” he muttered once more, and finding a bucket from the spring he poured water upon the bodies, and then one by one carried them to a spot among the trees near the spring, and lighted a fire to keep off the wolves.

With pick, spade and shovel he began his work of digging a grave.

Thus through the night he toiled, until at last a grave was dug, into which he placed the bodies in a row, and scattered over them a covering of leaves to hide them from the eyes of the young girl.

There he stood resting, his hand upon a spade, as the gray dawn crept over the prairie, and a light touch upon his arm caused him to turn quickly and drop his hands upon his revolvers.

“God bless you, sir,” and the white face of the young girl was turned up to his own.

“I have watched you for some time, for I awoke two hours ago, after a refreshing sleep, and saw your noble work.

“But, sir, are all gone?”

“You said there were eight, little woman?”

“Yes, eight.”

“There are eight bodies in that grave, and they must not be looked at, for you cannot tell them apart, you know.”

“Yes, they were thrown into the fire?”

“Yes.”

“Then I am alone in the world.”

“Yes, but not so bad as that, I hope, my child.”

“Yes, I am utterly alone, for I am the last of my race.”

Her words were most pathetic, her voice so full of sadness that the eyes of the man were dimmed with tears.

And she saw them and came close to him, for she felt her sorrow, her desolation, and without him her heart would have been filled with despair.

“You have lost your people, my dear child; but you are not alone, for Solomon Soulette will be your father, brother, friend and all.

“Yes, I am all alone, too, and my ranch lies many miles from here; but it's a good home. I've got a fair lot of cattle and comforts, and you can just have them all.

“But now let us bury these poor dead, little sister, and then we can talk it over.”

He went to work with a shovel, and she taking the spade helped him, for it did her good to work, to keep her from thinking.

He saw that the exertion was too much for her, so he said:

“Say, little sister, I'm getting awful hungry, so put some coffee on the fire and get some breakfast for us, won't you?”

She instantly obeyed, and by the time she had the meal ready the large grave was filled in and heaped up on the sides.

Then they had breakfast, but she drank only a tin-cup of coffee, for she could not eat a morsel of food.

Bringing water from the spring it was thrown upon the fire, and when cool enough the iron axles and framework of the wagons were carried and fastened down over the grave, so that wolves could not drag out the bodies.

“Now, little sister, we must start for home,” said the Texan, and soon after the two, thus strangely met, Solomon Soulette and Ellen Ashley were wending their way from the fatal spot where the Ashley train had met such a fearful end, and their destination was the lone ranch of the big Texan, who had won fame as a scout and Indian-fighter that had made him known along the Rio Grande border as the “Wild Hercules of the Prairies.”

CHAPTER V.

THE WILD HERCULES.

A TRIM log-cabin with three rooms, a shed piazza in front and standing amid a group of large trees overlooking a vast expanse of prairie land, and close to a stream, was the home of the Prairie Hercules or the Giant Guide, as Solomon Soulette was often called.

There was a cabin stable in the rear, and a fenced-in patch of land, where corn and vegetables were grown, and the rest of the ranch

seemed unbounded, for the few hundreds of cattle and half a hundred ponies belonging to the Texas ranchero, roamed at will, so long as they did not go over half a day's journey from the house.

There lived the ranchero, his only human companion being a negro, also of gigantic size, and who had come to Texas with his master some years before, but from whence no one seemed to exactly know.

Some said that the Giant Guide had been a planter in Tennessee, but had given up his home there to rough it in the wilds of Texas, and Black Moses, the negro had followed his fortunes. At first Soulette had acted as a guide, then turned Indian-fighter and at last ranchero, and Black Moses had followed untiringly.

There were several fine dogs on the ranch, large, savage-looking brutes, a cross between Siberian bloodhound and a St. Bernard, they looked, and these acted in the place of cowboys, rounding up the hounds when straying too far, and reporting by loud barking when the cattle or ponies got the better of them, so that Black Moses or his master could come to the rescue.

In the cabin of the ranchero there was an air of comfort, with books and other means for passing away the time; while Black Moses had his banjo and his master a French horn and violin in the way of music.

Such was the home to which Solomon Soulette took the orphan girl, Ellen Ashley.

The cabin appeared in sight the second day after leaving the scene of the train massacre, and Ellen Ashley gazed upon it with deepest interest.

She had found the Texan as gentle as a woman and as devoted to her as her father could have been, and she gazed upon the cabin with an interest she did not conceal.

"There is our home, little woman, and you'll get a greeting soon from the dogs and Black Moses," said the man.

Soon the dogs appeared in sight, and they had just left the guardianship of a herd of cattle and ponies which were kept in bands close to the hill.

They came in with a yelp of joy at the sight of their master, and after a word of greeting from him and a look at the maiden, all four of them started back to their duty as guards.

Then, a gigantic form, clad in buckskin, appeared on the cabin piazza.

"There is Mose," said the Texan, and Ellen Ashley beheld the black, good face and powerfully-built form of the negro companion of the ranchero.

"Lordy, boss, I were a-gittin' anxious about yer," said Mose, as the two rode up.

"Yes, I was delayed by Indians, and, Mose, I have brought with me a lady who is my adopted sister, and you and she are to become great friends, for her family were all slain, and we are all she has now."

"Lordy, boss, but I is glad, for it's jest what de cabing needs, a young missus."

"Glad ter see yer, missus, and you bets we is gwine ter make things pleasant fer yer here, so we is."

Such was Ellen Ashley's welcome to her new home, and one of the rooms was quickly fitted up for her especial use, and she was made most comfortable in it.

Black Mose was a fine cook, and the larder was well supplied, and Ellen Ashley now felt that her lot might have been far worse.

A few weeks after her coming, while wondering one day what it was best for her to do, Solomon Soulette came to her and said:

"Little sister, I have decided that it is best for you to carry out the plans which your father had in view for you, and go to boarding-school, so I will take you to Galveston, fit you up, and put you at school there."

"Oh, Solomon! but—" and the tears came into her eyes as Ellen Ashley spoke.

The huge Texan had told her that she must call him Solomon, and she had yielded.

"Now, let me tell you that I've got a couple of thousands laid by, and no use for the money, while the cattle are on the increase, so I am not poor."

"To school you must go, and you can spend your vacations with me, and in a couple of years graduate as a young lady, and in the mean time I'll do all I can to push the ranch into a greater success."

Thus urged, the maiden yielded, and soon after was located in a fine school for young ladies in Galveston, and to the lady in charge the good-hearted Texan had given money to fit his ward out in all that she needed.

The vacation came and Solomon was in town

ready to take the lovely girl home, where Moses gave her a royal welcome.

She saw that many improvements had been made, for two more rooms had been added to the cabin, and were furnished for her especial use.

Then a rustic fence surrounded the cabin, and flowers had been planted, while the garden had been enlarged and numerous vegetables added.

The herds of cattle and ponies were larger, and in fact the ranch and all about it seemed most prosperous.

The two months glided quickly away, in riding over the prairie with Solomon, hunting, fishing and indoor work and pleasures, and back to her school went Ellen Ashley.

The year passed, and once more Solomon Soulette was there to carry his ward home.

He was dressed up now, and looked grandly handsome in his suit of black, with his sombrero and long hair.

"I shall be so happy to go to the dear old home once more," Ellen had said, when as a graduate she left the school.

"My child, you are just verging upon eighteen; I am twelve years your senior, rather young for a self-appointed guardian; but I am so happy in being such that I am going to ask you to give me a better right to claim you; to tell you that I love you and ask you to become my wife, and as such return with me to the ranch.

"What do you say, Ellen, will you return as my wife, or—my sister?"

She threw her arm around his neck and kissing him, said fervently:

"Solomon, I love you, and have loved you ever since the day you saved me from the Comanches, and I will be your wife whenever you wish."

And that day they were married and returned to the ranch, where Black Moses in his rejoicing said:

"I is so glad missus be a orphan, fer ef ther boss hab a mar-in-law, she jist make dis ranch too hot fer us."

Thus did the Wild Hercules of the Prairie win his girl-bride.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FATAL SHOT.

A YEAR went by, and in that time not a shadow had fallen upon the married life of Solomon Soulette and his beautiful bride.

The ranch had been still more improved, and a Mexican cowboy and his wife had been added to the household, the former to take charge of the cattle, and the latter to be a servant in the cabin, for Black Moses had his hands full in the care of the garden and other duties about the ranch.

A few other rancheros had located near, which meant within a dozen miles of the Soulette home, and they were found to be pleasant people and good neighbors.

But then rumors came of Comanches on the war-path, and the Giant Guide was made captain of a band of rangers, a score in number, and they went on the trail of the Indians, so that they should not raid down into their locality.

Every precaution was taken against surprise, and while the Mexican was to act as a scout about the ranch, Black Moses was sent with the herds further to the southward, and this left Ellen and the Mexican woman alone on the place, but which neither seemed to dread much.

Nearly a month had the Rangers been off on the trail, when one day when in camp there arrived the Mexican cowboy from Soulette's ranch.

The Giant Captain, as his men called him, met him with alarm, fearing trouble at home; but he was told that his wife had sent him to say that there were no red-skins anywhere in the vicinity and it would be well to follow their trails into the mountains, from where they, the Rangers, were then in camp, and then return home.

There was a letter too, with words of love, telling him to come home when he could do so, and to be careful of himself, and the last words were:

"I have a strange, a startling surprise for you when you come, and maybe you may not find me here upon your return, for circumstances which I cannot explain by letter, may take me away from you."

The words seemed strange to him, for what circumstances were there to take his wife away from him.

Worried in spite of himself, he went to seek

the Mexican, and found him just finishing dinner, preparatory to his returning home.

"Carlos, is all going well at the ranch?" he asked.

"Yes, Senor Captain."

"And my wife is well?"

"She is, senor."

"Black Moses is not there?"

"No, senor, he is over among the hills with the cattle."

"But your wife is at the ranch?"

"Oh, si, senor."

"You came to tell me, as the rancheros requested, that there were no Comanches anywhere around our homes?"

"Yes, senor, so the other scouts reported to me, and I came to report to you."

"Then all goes well at the ranch?"

"It does, senor."

"The senora has not been alarmed to be alone at night, Moses being away with the cattle and you off scouting?"

"No, senor, for she has had a protector."

"Your wife?"

"Yes, senor, and the officer."

"What officer?"

"The army lieutenant, senor, who stays at night."

The Giant Captain started at the words, for they carried a chill to his heart.

"Is there an army officer at my house, Carlos?" he asked hoarsely.

"I saw him but once, senor, and he is a handsome man, and so generous, for he gave me a gold-piece, and told me to take good care of the Senora Ellen."

The Texan half turned away, and then suddenly asked:

"Who is he, Carlos?"

"Who knows, senor? But Rita, my wife, says that he comes at night, and is on the trail by day."

"All right, Carlos; return home now, but do not say that I know my wife has—has—company."

"No, senor."

So Carlos returned to the ranch, and the Rangers, instead of making a trip into the mountains, were started on the homeward trail by their captain.

One by one the men dropped out as they neared their homes, and just before sunset Solomon Soulette found himself alone and several miles from his ranch.

Suddenly he started, for ahead of him was a horseman, and his glass revealed a soldier, with straps upon his shoulders and military trappings upon his horse.

Drawing his horse back into the chaparral, the Texan watched the horseman, who had not seen him, until he was out of sight.

He saw that he was upon the trail leading to his home, and all the jealous fury aroused by the words of the Mexican cowboy, Carlos, rose in his heart.

His face was white with suppressed emotion, his eyes burned, and his teeth were set as he again rode on his way.

Once, some six months before, a company of cavalry had camped near his ranch, and the commander, a handsome young lieutenant, had seemed deeply interested in his wife, so much so that the Texan had become jealous of him, seeing which, Ellen had not again seen the soldier when he called.

This must be the same man, thought the Giant Guide, as he rode on his way in the darkening day.

Riding more rapidly, he again came in sight of the horseman ahead, and saw that he was going straight toward his ranch.

He entered the gate and rode around the house to the hitching-rack.

The Texan dismounted at the gate and crept toward the house, which was well lighted, as though a visitor was expected.

The form of the soldier was seen to ascend the few steps of the piazza and enter the parlor, and he stood just where he could be observed through the open window.

It appeared to the Texan that he heard a call, and a response, and then into the wide-open hallway of the cabin glided the form of his wife.

There was a lamp in the hallway, and he saw her distinctly, saw her enter the parlor and walk swiftly toward the officer, who stepped quickly toward her.

The Texan stood like a statue, and beheld his wife raise her lips to those of the officer, who enfolded her in his arms.

Then his rifle was thrown forward, the good rifle which had saved her from the Comanches, his eye ran along the sights, his finger touched the trigger and the sharp report followed.

With the crack of the rifle the two forms dropped to the floor, for his aim had been but too true.

A wild laugh broke from the man's lips, such a laugh as a maniac might utter, and, turning upon his heel, he went back to his horse, mounted and dashed away over the prairie.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HERMIT HERCULES.

The scene of my story changes from the prairies of the Lone Star State to the Northern plains, at a time two years after the incident related in the last chapter.

The Northern tribes of Indians, of whom the Sioux were the most powerful, were infesting the border settlements and trails to such an extent, that it had been found necessary to establish forts at different points and strongly garrison them, so that a force could be obtained when needed, to beat off the red raiders, if not to severely punish them for their cruelties.

The headquarters fort of this chain of garrisons was Fort M—, and it was well situated, not very far from the Overland stage trail across the plains and mountains of the far West.

It was commanded by Colonel Carter, a man of distinguished ability, and one who was humane with a foe and popular with all of his men.

A battery of light artillery, a regiment of infantry, a battalion of cavalry, with a couple of dozen scouts under Buffalo Bill, some thousand men all told, comprised his command; but then there were sutlers, hangers-on, and a few refugees encamped about the fort that swelled the number to a couple of hundred more, and made it quite a little settlement.

As the scouts had reported secret "signs" about the vicinity of the fort, to indicate Indians being around in some force, a company of cavalry under Captain Louis Rosafy was sent out to reconnoiter.

With him went Buffalo Bill and four of his scouts, and the command thus numbered some sixty men.

With the comforts of their quarters at the fort, the genial society of the officer's families, and especially the bright eyes the senior captain's beautiful daughter Ivy, the young gallants of the command were not anxious to go upon a long and weary trail of days, suffering hardships, dreading ambushes and with only hard knocks to expect for their trouble.

But Captain Louis Rosafy was a dashing fellow, ever ready for the trail, and when called upon to suffer hardships was wont to be avenged upon the Indians for it.

When he was so fortunate as to secure the personal services of the famous chief of scouts, Buffalo Bill, the young captain became so daring in his expeditions that he won the name of being the most dashing officer of the command, and his men were always glad to go with him on a dangerous war-path.

Of late there had been rumors of a kind that led Colonel Carter to believe that the red-skins were roaming in force, preparatory to a sweeping raid upon the border settlements and posts, and so Captain Rosafy was ordered to find out exactly the situation.

The cavalry thus sent on scouting duty left the fort at midnight, and their trappings were so muffled as to make no sound even at a gallop.

They were all armed thoroughly, had ample ammunition along, and stores to last a couple of weeks, carried on pack-horses.

There were also half a dozen led horses along, in case of accident to some of the animals in the command, and a scout, sergeant and four soldiers were the special guard of what the men dubbed the "supply-train."

In case of action these were to be placed in some safe place, so as not to retard the movements of the company in a charge or rapid march to some given point.

Thus equipped and ready for whatever was before him, Captain Rosafy led his command out of the fort, and the scouts scattered as flankers, two on either side, and Buffalo Bill ahead, so as not to be led into an ambush, for it was not known whether Indian scouts were watching their movements or not.

But the night passed away without a red-skin having been seen, and soon after dawn the troopers halted for breakfast and rest.

Buffalo Bill was some distance ahead, but as he had selected the halting place, Captain Rosafy felt that he would return when he wished to do so.

The captain and his officers were just sitting down to the very tempting breakfast which the

negro servant had prepared, when Buffalo Bill appeared.

His horse showed that he had been ridden harder than the pace at which the rest of the command had been kept, and as he took his seat on a rock near, Captain Rosafy said in a meaning way:

"You have news, Cody?"

"I have found a very fresh trail, captain, made within the last few hours, and I think it was left by red-skins who knew of our coming."

"Indeed! but you have seen no scouts?"

"No, sir, yet they might have seen us and reported to the force whose trail I saw, thus causing them to retreat."

"How many, or could you tell?"

"Yes, sir, I rode on to the creek, some five miles above and examined the trail there, so got a fair estimate of their force."

"About how many?"

"I should say a hundred."

"Well, I hope we can come up with them and surprise them."

"I believe that we can, sir, for they hardly expect a company of cavalry only, to push on so far into the mountains."

"Well, Cody, we will go hot on their trail, and perhaps can surprise them in their camp to-night."

"That's what I will try for, sir, and I'll change to one of the rested horses and push on, leaving a note for you in the trail, so keep an eye for it."

The scout then had breakfast and mounting one of the led horses, to give his own a rest, rode away an hour in advance of the starting time of the troop.

He soon came upon the trail of which he had spoken, and followed it at a good pace until he entered the foot-hills.

Here he halted and dismounting closely examined the tracks, reading every sign as a scholar does a book.

"There were fully a hundred ponies, but whether every one had a red-skin rider is the question, and the tracks show that they were retreating rapidly.

"It is just about a hundred miles to their village from here, and they may have gone on there, or they may have flanked, so as to come in the rear of our men and attack us."

As the scout stood soliloquizing as to the movements of the Indians, he failed to notice a form come over a ridge and advance toward him.

It was a man, and yet his size was remarkable for he was almost a giant in height, and possessed a striking muscular development.

His attire was also striking, for he wore buckskin leggings, skin moccasins, a blanket jacket and a cap made of a fox-skin, the tail hanging down his back, yet not as far down as reached his long black hair.

A pair of revolvers were in his belt, and he carried across his shoulder a Colt's repeating rifle, which he seemed ready to use at a second's notice if need be.

"Well, pard, how are you?"

The deep voice caused Buffalo Bill to start, draw a revolver and level it in a second of time.

"No need to shoot, pard, for I'm your friend, not your foe," said the man.

"Who are you?" and Buffalo Bill lowered his revolver, yet still held it ready for use if there was need of it.

"You would not know if I told you, for my home is far from here, when I answered to my name; but I believe people hereabout call me the Giant Hercules."

"So I thought, for I have heard of you."

"Never any harm of me, I hope?"

"Oh, no, only that you were a mountain hunter whom men seemed to fear from some reason, and the red-skins were friendly toward you."

"That is false, for they dread me, and I kill a red-skin whenever I see one."

"I am here now to save your life."

"Ah! and how?"

"You are following a Sioux trail?"

"Yes."

"You are not alone?"

"How do you know that?"

"I know that some sixty soldiers are following your trail, and the Indians know it too."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, they have had spies upon the fort for several days, saw you start out last night, as I did, and then warned their comrades, who were some hundred in number."

"And you saw us leave the fort?"

"Yes, for I was going to warn the commandant of danger; but I followed the Indian scouts back to their force and saw them set a

trap for you, which is so complete as not to leave a man of you, did they get a chance to spring it," and the Hermit Hercules calmly seated himself upon a rock, as though he had more to tell.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HERMIT HERCULES AS A GUIDE.

In spite of the story told by the Hermit Hercules, Buffalo Bill was not caught off of his guard, but still held his revolver ready for use, and though he too sat down, it was in a position that gave him an equal chance with the mysterious personage so near to him.

The scout had heard of a strange man living in the mountains for a year past, and one described to the few scouts who had seen him as a man of enormous size, savage-looking as a grizzly with long hair and beard, and dressed in skins.

It was supposed that he was an ally of the Indians, and orders had been issued from the forts to capture him if possible.

Now he was face to face with this remarkable Hermit Hercules, and Buffalo Bill could not but admit that he was a man to fear.

"You have more to tell, sir?" he said, inquiringly, when the two were seated.

"Yes."

"Well, out with it."

"Do you know a valley some eight miles from here known as the Sink?"

"Yes."

"This trail you are following leads through the Sink."

"So I supposed."

"The Sink is some three miles long, and half a mile wide, and from the end of it nearest to us, we can see the trail as it winds along nearly to the other end."

"Well, pard?"

"Do you know the Sink well?"

"Not very, but I have been through it once."

"Well, I do know it well, and will tell you that the pass at the upper end is narrower than at this, while the sides are precipitous in every direction, leaving the only entrance and outlet to the valley by the passes."

"Ah! this is something to know," said Buffalo Bill, with interest.

"There is more to tell, for even a man of your fame, for I have seen you before, when you little dreamed of it, and know you to be Buffalo Bill—am I right?"

"So men call me."

"Well, as I was saying that even a man of your skill as a trailer, coming to the entrance to the valley and seeing the trail far ahead would naturally believe that the red-skins had gone on and so follow them."

"Yes."

"Well, they went on; but they sent couriers on ahead to where they had four hundred braves, to tell them to ambush your soldiers in the Sink."

"These red-skins sent a force three times your own by a flank movement to this end of the valley, to fall in behind you, and a force double your own was to lie in ambush at the other pass for you, while others were to lie in wait to harass you on your retreat, which was to be right upon destruction from another ambush."

"You are telling a very interesting story, my friend."

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes."

"Well, my advice to you is to send in all haste to the fort for aid, and have your man guide them to this point, and lose no time."

"The red-skins are so sure you will follow, that their scouts even are called in and they are just waiting for you to enter the trap."

"Now I can guide your force around this valley and not take you five miles out of the way, and bring you down on the very top of the red-skin ambush at the upper pass, for you to attack at dawn, and your relief force, from the fort, can, under my guidance—for I will come back in time to meet them—enter the Sink by a secret way and flank the Sioux at the lower pass, do you see, and the result will be that the trappers are trapped in their own trap."

"Pard, I thank you, and I trust you wholly."

"Here is my hand in friendship, so come back with me to the captain, and we can send one of my scouts to the fort for aid, and it should reach here by hard riding by midnight."

"Yes, and I can get back here to guide them by the secret pass into the Sink."

"Let us go."

"Mount my horse then, for—"

"No, I have a mount," and a shrill call

brought a superb-looking roan of great size to the side of his master.

"I have another like him up in my lair, for I live not far from here—now come," and the Hermit Hercules set off at a rapid pace on the back trail, the scout riding by his side.

In half an hour they met the troopers and Captain Rosafy and his two lieutenants heard the story of the strange man whom all gazed upon with interest, for there was that in his face and his secluded manner of living alone in the mountains to show that he had a history, that he was one whose life was enveloped in a sad mystery.

"What do you say, Cody?" asked Captain Rosafy when he had heard all that the scout and Hermit Hercules had to say.

"I would say, sir, to send one of my men at once to the fort, sir, for a couple of companies."

"Let me suggest two pieces of light artillery also, for by muffling the wheels you can get them into the valley, and with shells you can utterly demoralize the Indians," said the Hermit Hercules.

"A good idea, indeed; but what do you say, Dana?"

The lieutenant addressed, said quickly:

"I agree with Cody, sir."

"And your opinion, Ames?"

The second lieutenant at once responded:

"Get the relief, captain, and let us make a clean sweep that the red-skins will remember."

"Such is my wish, so Cody get one of your men to dispatch at once, and I will write a line to the colonel urging all dispatch and three companies, with two light guns."

In ten minutes more the scout was riding at full speed back for the fort, and the plan of action was being arranged.

The "supply train," as the led horses and pack-animals were called, were to remain there, while the Hermit Hercules was to guide the troopers around to the ridge which would look down upon the ambushed Indians in the upper pass of the valley.

Then he was to return to meet the relief from the fort and guide a part of them through the secret pass into the valley.

The remainder were to go through on the regular trail at dawn, and be thus supposed by the Indians to be Captain Rosafy's party, for the Sioux would not attack them until the ambush from above would force them to retreat, and then expect to head them off and massacre the entire force.

As they would expect only a small force of flying troopers, when the artillery opened from the valley upon the ambush, and five times the expected number was seen, it would utterly surprise the red-skins, and hem them in, for the Hermit Hercules had suggested that there should be a dozen soldiers left with the supply-guard, to advance toward the ambush and make it an overwhelming defeat for the savages.

When all was arranged, with the Hermit Hercules leading, side by side with Buffalo Bill, Captain Rosafy and his gallant men set off to spring the trap which the Indians had so cleverly set.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRAP SET.

THE trail which the Hermit Hercules led the troopers by, to flank the valley known as the Sink, was not known to Buffalo Bill; but through the darkness went the strange guide, without halt or hesitation, among rocks and forests where it was so black one could not see the man before him, and so had to leave it to his horse to follow mechanically.

After a ride of a dozen miles the guide halted in a little opening, through which ran a stream, and beyond it rose a ridge heavily timbered.

"You muzzle your horses here, for a neigh, when we get a mile further, would spoil all," said the Hercules.

So the horses were muzzled, and mounting once more the party pressed on up to the top of the ridge.

The trail there was not a bad one, and wound along over pine straw, for the ridge was clad with pines, and the hoof-falls gave back no sound.

At length the guide halted and said:

"The pass is just half a mile away, and you must dismount and walk there, for your horses can remain here under a couple of men."

Silently the order was obeyed, and soon the troopers acting as infantry scouts, found themselves perched upon a cliff overlooking a narrow pass.

"The Sioux are encamped just around that bend, and they will come just beneath you to lie in ambush.

"Be silent as death, or you will spoil all.

"I will now return and meet the relief party, and arrange to have them enter the valley soon after dawn.

"If you will go with me, Buffalo Bill, as far as the place we left the horses, I will show you how you can, after opening upon the ambushed Indians, ride down into the valley above here and head off the flying savages."

So saying he stalked silently away and the scout followed him.

The trail leading to the valley, from where the horses were, was not the eighth of a mile, and an easy one to descend.

"Now return and keep those blue-coats from going to sleep and snoring, for a sound will destroy all.

"I will be on with the relief, if it comes, and if not, I will set those Indians at the lower pass in retreat."

"But how?"

"They fear me, and I'll find some way to do it; but then we want to have the military start them and keep them going too."

And without another word the Hermit Hercules mounted his horse and rode off in the darkness, while Buffalo Bill returned to where he had left Captain Rosafy.

Alone, the Hercules arrived at the spot, where he was to meet the relief; it was after midnight, and he dismounted to give his horse a rest, while as though caring naught for fatigue himself, he paced to and fro, his eyes and ears on the alert for the coming troopers.

At last he halted and placed his hand to his ear, listening attentively.

"They are coming, and they have ridden hard," he muttered, and once more resumed his walk.

Gradually a low sound, like far distant thunder grew louder, and now and then a sharp ring, like steel clashing upon steel would ring out.

Then like black phantoms there loomed into sight a long line of horsemen, and their rapid pace had been slackened to a walk.

Stepping out into the trail the Hermit Hercules stood like a statue awaiting their coming, and soon the man in advance called out:

"Ho, Hercules, is that you?"

"Yes, and you have done well, scout," was the reply of the hermit, addressing Jack Nelson, the scout, who was known as a hard rider, the very one to send on a ride after a relief corps.

"Here is Captain Allen, Hercules, for I don't know any other name to introduce you by," said Jack Nelson, as the officer in command of the party rode up.

The captain extended his hand cordially, and said:

"I am glad to meet you, sir; but Jack forgot to tell you that Captain Allen has a hundred and fifty splendid soldiers at his back, and it is for you to cut the work out for them to do."

"I have heard of the —th cavalry, and their work before, Captain Allen, and feel certain that they will do their duty; but you will be able to give your men and horses a couple of hours' rest, for it is about two o'clock now, is it not?"

"Yes, and both men and horses need rest, for we have ridden at a tremendous pace from the fort, as Jack Nelson's horse fell with him and broke a leg, when a dozen miles away, so he had to make the distance on foot, and nobly he did it, not to delay our start, while you see the plucky fellow returned with us too."

"He deserves credit, sir; but now let me state the situation to you and your officers, so that it will be thoroughly understood."

"Certainly," and calling upon his officers to approach, Captain Allen continued:

"I beg pardon, but by what name am I to introduce you?"

"I am called the Hermit Hercules, sir, from a fancy I have had to live alone, and my great size; but my name is Sol Soule."

The Hercules was then introduced to the officers, and in a few words made known exactly the situation and plan of attack, after which he added:

"Now I will stand guard, Captain Allen, while you and all your men gain some rest."

The captain demurred, but the Hercules insisted, and soon the whole camp was in slumber, while the lone sentinel walked slowly in wide circles around them.

From time to time Captain Allen would awake, but he soon saw the silent, giant form moving about, and he felt that all was safe, while Jack Nelson muttered to some soldiers:

"With that man on duty I could sleep in an Injun village."

It was half an hour to dawn when the soldiers were awakened by the Hercules, and coffee was boiled in a sheltered nook, so that a slight breakfast could be had.

Then, leaving the supply horses and a guard of thirty men under a lieutenant to go on to where the little party from Captain Rosafy's command had been left, and which combined were to form a small reserve, the Hermit Hercules led the troopers on toward the scene of conflict.

CHAPTER X.

THE HERMIT HERCULES SPRINGS HIS TRAP.

"ARE you not afraid that the eyes of the Indians are upon you?" asked Captain Allen, as the Hermit Hercules halted the command just at dawn.

"No, captain, for their nearest scout is a mile from here, and yonder is the supply train of Captain Rosafy—see!"

The led and pack-horses, with a scout and half a dozen soldiers were seen up a canyon, and those of Captain Allen's command who were to join them at once were cut off and sent there, the lieutenant in charge receiving his orders to "Wait until you hear the attack up in the Sink, and then move up to fire on the red-skins in the pass, trying to drive them back into the valley upon the other troopers."

The command was then split in two, one under Captain Allen to move on into the Sink, pretending to be the men of Captain Rosafy, following the Indian trail, while the others, under the guidance of the Hermit Hercules, was to go on and enter the valley near the center by a secret pass, and be ready to support either of the other forces.

"They will let you go through the pass, captain, without a shot, and close in only when firing at the upper pass leads them to think you have been attacked by the ambush there."

"As they move into the valley from the lower pass, you can return, and with the lieutenant in their rear, catch them between two fires, and the same can be done with your other force and Captain Rosafy's company."

So all was understood and the forces moved for their respective positions, one to remain until the firing began, the second to go off with the Hermit Hercules as guide, and the third, under Captain Allen, to follow the trail on into the valley.

As the day dawned the trail was plainly seen, and the scout in advance pretending to be watching it closely, had his eyes upon the hills and rocks upon either side.

"See there, captain," he said, as a red-skin's head-dress was seen above a rock.

"Yes, and I saw another among the rocks in the pass yonder," returned Captain Allen.

It was a moment of great suspense, for, after all, the Hercules might be wrong in his calculations, and they receive a withering fire from the ambush at the lower pass.

But not a face blanched, not a heart quivered with coward fear, and on they went.

They all knew that the eyes of Indians numbering four times their immediate force was upon them, and gloating in the hope that when going into an ambush at the pass above, they would come flying back to rush into another one there; but not a man wavered, and Captain Allen was as calm as a May morn.

Through the dread ordeal they went, following the Indian trail up the rocks toward the other pass, and they soon went out of the sight of their watching foes among the timber near the other end of the valley.

They came in sight of the upper pass, and backward glances showed the anxious Indians in their rear closing in behind them.

And before them all was quiet, so quiet that even Jack Nelson whispered to Captain Nelson:

"Thar don't seem ter be a Ingun around, sir."

"I guess they see them, Jack."

"Oh, yes, sir, and in another hundred yards we'll be in range."

And as the scout uttered the word threescore puffs of smoke broke from the cliffs over the pass, as suddenly the red-skins showed themselves, and Captain Rosafy and his men had begun gun work.

The red-skins had been hiding behind the bends, some hundred and fifty in number, and a lookout was watching the troopers, to signal to them when to dash out upon their enemies after those among the rocks had delivered a volley of bullets and arrows among them.

But, as they were preparing for the volley, suddenly from over their heads, where the cliff rose straight and impassable a hundred feet, the

troopers of Captain Rosafy poured in a terrific fire from their carbines down upon the unsuspecting Sioux.

Had a leaden hail come from the clouds, with thunder and lightning, the amazed red-skins could not have been more taken aback.

They were too much dazed to seek cover until a second discharge brought them to their senses, and then upon them charged Captain Allen and his men.

The action was sharp, hot and decisive, for the Indian camp was taken, with their ponies, and the Sioux, unable to fly fast enough, deserted their horses before the rush of the cavalry, and took to the hills.

As Captain Allen found himself victor, Captain Rosafy hailed him from aloft:

"Well done, gallant 'A' Company."

"I will be down in the valley soon, to support you, when you attack those below."

"Ay, ay, Rosafy, we go back at once, as if in retreat," and the order was given to leave a score of men to look after the wounded, and capture the Indian ponies, while the balance began what appeared to be a rapid retreat down the valley.

Then, with wild yells, the large force of Sioux at the lower pass, leaving a reserve to fall back upon, began to advance upon what they believed to be panic-stricken men.

But, as they reached a thick growth of timber in the valley, there arose a wild, ringing, appalling war-cry that seemed hardly human, and out dashed on horseback, all alone, the giant form of the Hermit Hercules.

His terrific war-cry had fairly startled the soldiers behind him, and it brought the rushing Sioux to a sudden halt.

But only for an instant, for on they came, to suddenly drag their horses back as they beheld, not only the Hermit Hercules in sight, and the coming force of Captain Allen, but a hundred more gallant troopers, mounted and forming for the charge.

"Charge!"

With the command the troopers gave an inspiring cry, and rushed down upon their foes, while from their stand upon the hillside the two pieces of artillery opened hotly.

At the same moment from the lower pass was heard a volley of carbines, followed by cheers, which told that the lieutenant in charge of the supply reserve was at work taking the position at the entrance to the valley.

And more, up at the other pass, were heard cheers and scattering shots, showing that Captain Rosafy had descended from the ridge, and was cutting off the flying Sioux, while shells from the two guns went flying and bursting over their heads.

Down upon the now panic-stricken Indians rushed the troopers in the valley, and broken, shattered, surrounded, there was but one thing for the hunted red-men to do, and that was to desert their ponies and escape up the steep sides of the bank as best they could on foot.

This they did, and within half an hour from the firing of Captain Rosafy from the cliff, the conflict was ended, the Sioux were scattered in flight on foot through mountain, canyon and valley, and the victorious soldiers were camped in the valley which was to have been a valley of death to them.

A few of the troopers had fallen to rise no more, a score had received wounds more or less severe, and were already in the skillful hands of Surgeon Delamater.

Captain Rosafy had received a slight wound from an arrow, but made light of it, and the officers were gathered together discussing their complete victory, while Buffalo Bill and his scouts were still pressing the Indians along with the Hermit Hercules, whose appalling war-cry ever and anon resounded back from the hills as he pursued the Sioux in their flight, his every yell hastening their steps.

The loss to the Sioux had been heavy, and the soldiers were busy digging graves for the dead.

At length the distant firing of the pursuing scouts under Buffalo Bill died away, and the war-cries of the Hermit Hercules were no longer heard.

"Well, gentlemen, our victory is complete, and we owe it to that strange man, the Hermit Hercules," said Captain Allen, who being the senior in rank, had now assumed command.

"Yes, and yet we heard of him as being the friend of the Sioux, and a renegade to his race."

"His actions have stamped the lie on that rumor; but here comes Cody."

Buffalo Bill and his scouts were now seen returning, and the chief of scouts reported the red-skins scattered to the four quarters, and making on foot for their village sixty miles away.

"I left several men to scout around, and if sentinels are stationed at the two passes, captain, they will be all that is needed for the present; but have you seen the Hercules?"

"No, I thought he was with you," said Captain Allen.

"He went off alone, and we heard his terrific war-cries for awhile, and one seemed to be cut off, as from a shot, and since then I have heard no more."

"I will go at once on his trail, for he may be wounded."

"I sincerely hope not, Cody, and I will be glad if you would go," responded Captain Allen somewhat anxiously.

Calling to four of his men to accompany him, while Captain Rosafy also volunteered his services, the chief of scouts set off on the search for the Hermit Hercules.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MISSING MAN.

HAVING known the direction in which the Hermit Hercules had gone, Buffalo Bill had no trouble in following his trail.

It led up from the Sink, or, as some called it, the Sunken Valley, by the secret trail through which the strange man had led one party of troopers to the attack.

Then it passed over the ridge where Captain Rosafy and his men had been in hiding, and then on to the mountains through a deep canyon.

To nearly this point Buffalo Bill and his men had pushed before, but they had heard the cry of the Hermit Hercules beyond them, so they knew that they were now on the right trail.

Up the canyon they went until suddenly the scout halted.

At his feet were red stains, and marks that caused him to stop and silently regard them.

"A man was wounded here and fell from his horse."

"Was it the Hercules, Cody?" asked Captain Rosafy.

"I think so, I fear so, for it was just about here that I heard his war-cry suddenly terminate, as I told you."

So on they went, and red drops on the trail guided them now.

The trail led by a pile of rocks, where there was visible the dead form of an Indian.

"Here is where the red-skin lay in wait for him and fired that shot," said Buffalo Bill, and still following the red-marked trail they went on until it turned up the steep side of the canyon.

Still they followed, to a point of rocks above, overhanging the valley, and here all halted.

Behind the point of rocks, on the ridge, was a level plateau, heavily timbered.

Through it ran a stream that tumbled over the rocks in a cascade, and just here, nestling almost out of sight, was a small log cabin, with a sheltered shed back of it.

In this shed stood a horse, saddled and bridled, and it was the large roan ridden by the Hermit Hercules.

He gave a welcoming neigh as the party appeared, and Buffalo Bill pointed to his blood-stained saddle.

"I hope he is not dead," said Captain Rosafy.

"If he had strength enough to come to his house, I think it cannot be so bad," and the scout dismounted and stepped toward the cabin, when a large dog appeared in the doorway and growled.

But the scout spoke sternly to the brute and passed on into the cabin, followed by Captain Rosafy.

It was a humble home, ten feet square, with a bunk, table, chair, and a few cooking utensils, that was all.

On the bunk lay the large form of the giant, and his eyes were open and fixed upon the visitors.

"A red-skin ambushed me and put a bullet into me here—guess it's about the end of me," he said quietly.

"We shall soon know, my good friend, for fortunately for his own amusement Captain Rosafy has studied medicine and surgery, and is better than half the doctors," said Buffalo Bill cheerily.

"I managed to get upon my horse again and reach home to die."

"No, indeed, not die, for you will soon be all right," and as the scout spoke Captain Rosafy advanced, his coat off and a case of instruments in his hands which he had sent one of the men to bring from his saddle pocket.

The massive breast of the Hercules was bared and the wound was found, entering dangerously near the heart.

But Captain Rosafy proved himself entitled to the scout's praise of his surgical skill, and after some little time found and extracted the bullet, the wounded man not even flinching under the torture.

"I came here to die alone, but you all would not let me, so I suppose I must live," he said, when his wound was dressed.

"Yes, you are good for a long time yet, my friend, and until you are able to be carried to the fort, I shall have half a dozen scouts and my company remain as a guard, for it will make the Indians believe we have established an outpost here and keep them alarmed for an attack on their village.

"I will return now to the valley and be back to-night with my men," and leaving two scouts to look after the wounded Hercules, Buffalo Bill and the others accompanied the captain back to the valley, burying the dead Indian chief on the way, while the scout remarked:

"The Hercules hit this fellow square between the eyes even after receiving his wound."

Upon consultation with Captain Allen it was decided best not to attempt to move the wounded soldiers from the valley, but to leave a company there also, with half a dozen scouts, while Captain Rosafy and his men should go to the vicinity of the cabin of the Hercules to camp, and that supplies would be at once sent to them and all else to make the sufferers comfortable.

The next day Captain Allen and the main force started for the fort, and great was the rejoicing there when the victory over the Sioux became known, while the greatest anxiety was felt for the Hermit Hercules for fear he might not recover from his dangerous wound.

Supplies were at once sent back, under Buffalo Bill and his scouts, and upon their arrival the wounded soldiers in the valley, and the Hercules in his humble cabin were made really comfortable.

Captain Rosafy and his men had gone into camp in a strong place, with one of the guns, while the other company in the valley had the other piece, and being but five miles apart the firing of either piece would be a call for help from one camp to the other.

The other scouts made wide circuits each day, to see if the Indians were coming in force, and Buffalo Bill had stationed at every ten miles on the way to the fort, a scout courier, so that in case of an advance by the Sioux, word could be sent with all speed for aid.

And at Fort M— two companies of cavalry, four companies of mounted infantry and the remaining guns of the Light Battery held themselves in constant readiness to move to the protection of Louis Rosafy and his men and those in the Sunken Valley.

Thus the weeks went by until six had been told and the Hermit Hercules was able to be removed to the valley.

A rest of a few days there and then all the wounded were carried by easy marches to Fort M—, where the welcome that greeted the brave band was enough to gladden their hearts.

And thus did the Hermit Hercules find himself an inmate of Fort M— and no longer a dweller in his lone cabin in the mountains.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SOLDIER SPORT.

COLONEL CARTER, the commandant of Fort M—, sat in his pleasant quarters some three months after the fight in the Sunken Valley, awaiting to see the Hermit Hercules, whom he had sent for.

The Hercules entered and saluted politely, while Colonel Carter said kindly:

"Be seated, Mr. Soule, and let me congratulate you upon your recovery, though it has been a long siege for you, and a close call from death."

"Thank you, sir, it was indeed a close call, and when I know all the trouble I caused it would have been better had I been left in my cabin to die, for really, sir, I have nothing to live for."

"This is a strange thing for a man like you to say, Soule, for you were destined for a nobler career."

"I certainly have to thank you for the signal victory you gained for us, and it was to consult with you about the future that I sent for you, as Surgeon Delamater reported to me that you had been discharged from his care."

"Yes, sir, I feel myself once more, or soon will, I think, thanks to the kind attentions of Surgeon Delamater, Buffalo Bill and Captain Rosafy, not to speak of the kindnesses yourself and others have shown me."

"Much more could be done for you and yet not half repay your valuable services; but you

yet look a trifle pale and haggard, so must take life easy for awhile.

"But what is your wish for the future?"

"I suppose, sir, to go back to my old hermit life, sir."

"Oh no, you are not the man for that, for you are a gentleman, a man of education, and can do much good in the world."

"Let me apply for an officer's commission for you, and I think there would be no trouble in getting the President to make the appointment."

"Thank you, sir, more than thanks, Colonel Carter; but I am not the man to hold a commission, for I have not command over myself, so should not attempt to command others."

"You surprise me, for from all I have heard of you—"

"What have you heard, sir?" quickly and anxiously asked the man.

"That you were as cool in action as a trained officer, planned the fight in Sunken Valley, and never uttered a murmur at your sufferings."

"Ah!" and the man seemed relieved, and then said, as if to explain his manner:

"Let me say to you, sir, that I was born a gentleman, and inherited a fortune; but I had a curse upon me, that of gambling, and I played away over the card-table all my possessions.

"I need hardly tell in extenuation that I was cheated by one I deemed my friend, and in discovering how I had been wronged, that I had been wronged by one I trusted, I vowed he should never enjoy his stolen wealth, and forced him to meet me upon the field of honor, and killed him.

"I became a wanderer, a gambler as well, and ended by going to live alone, with but one companion, to break off the habit.

"It was not a good move for me, bad as had been those before, and I left all to live the life of a hermit.

"Would you lead such as I again into temptation, Colonel Carter?"

"Yes, for I believe you have the power now to resist and to make a splendid officer.

"I thank you for your confidence, Soule, and I wish to apply for a lieutenancy for you."

"No, not that; but I will give myself a trial, if so you will, and enlist as a private soldier in Captain Rosafy's company, and see if it is in me to work my way up."

"Do you mean it?"

"I do, sir."

"Would it not be better for you to become a scout under Buffalo Bill, for you are a splendid trailer and understand Indian nature well from all accounts?"

"No, for were I to go off on a scout alone, my old hermit life might win me back to it and Sol Soule the scout would turn up missing."

"Well, try the enlistment idea if you wish."

"I will, sir, and go from here to Captain Rosafy and report my wish."

"Take your time, for you are not yet strong."

"Oh, yes, colonel, I am my old self again; but let me again thank you," and the strange man left the quarters of the commandant, and the garrison was amazed the next day to know that Sol Soule had become a private soldier, declining the offer of the colonel to make him an officer.

For months all went on well, and the Soldier Hercules, as his comrades call him, was perfection in all things.

But pay-day came and the men, with plenty of money, began to play, and then came the struggle in the mind and heart of Soule.

He resisted strongly for awhile, kept to himself, did all in his power to ward off the accursed temptation upon him, and then, with a little laugh, walked into the barracks where his comrades had a quiet game of cards and flinging down some money said:

"Pards, give me that amount in chips, and I'll try you a game or two."

From that night the Soldier Hercules was known as the Soldier Sport, and a more thorough gambler was not to be found.

He would bet on the weather, the time of day and all else that a wager could be gotten upon, and he was generally successful, and his luck began to be dreaded until only the settlers, teamsters and the men about camp having the most money dared to play with him.

And this yielding to the temptation to play cards again, after his bitter lessons of the past, once more brought forth cruel fruit, as the next chapter will reveal.

CHAPTER XIII.

OUTLAWED.

THAT the giant soldier had broken his resolve, and had yielded to temptation, Colonel Carter was not long in discovering.

To save him, he made the most severe orders about gambling in the barracks, and yet the evil was still indulged in and nothing could check the course of the unfortunate soldier.

His manner had always been that of a man suffering from some deep sorrow, and it was said that he never slept at night.

He never shirked guard duty, but on the contrary seemed to be glad to be at work, anything to keep him awake.

He would slip out often and gamble through the night.

Yet he never missed a duty, was a perfect soldier, and no complaint other than gambling had ever been found with him.

He was bitter, cruelly so at times, but always more severe toward himself than others.

The man was liked by his officers and comrades, yet feared by all, and there were those who said that his brain was unseated and some day he would do some terrible deed.

One day he lost heavily at cards, and from then his luck seemed to change and he became a changed man.

The paymaster arrived again and the men were paid off, Sol Soule among the others.

At once he began to gamble, and he lost his all.

He borrowed from officers and comrades, and this too went, and in despair he left the place and walked out into the night air.

The fever of gambling was upon him, and yet without money what could he do?

He walked over by two officers' quarters, though he knew it was against orders.

Suddenly he stopped by an open window and glared into it like a wild beast about to spring upon its prey.

There sat the paymaster in his room, counting over his money, going over his accounts.

He had paid off a number of the men and yet he had a large sum over.

"I cheated my comrades to-night to win, that I might yet have money to gamble with, and yet I could not be a winner."

"It is the first time I ever cheated, and they were my friends."

"I killed Luke Spencer for that very act, for cheating me, my friend."

"Well, I have fallen low, indeed; but I must play; I must have money to gamble with."

"And there is money, thousands of dollars before my eyes, so why shall I not have it?"

He spoke in a smothered tone, his broad breast rising and falling with the intense feeling within him.

He started away, turned and looked back.

Then he retraced his steps and looked all around him.

No one was near except the paymaster.

It was after midnight, and the post was in deep repose, only the sentinels on their posts pacing to and fro.

The light fell upon his face and revealed how he suffered, for it was white, haggard, desperate.

His body was bent forward, as though for a spring upon his victim.

His hands were clinched until the nails cut into the palms.

It was a cruel, a fearful struggle, and for a moment he seemed as though he would resist.

But, turning suddenly, he strode into the room.

"Paymaster, I must have that money, for I am a desperate man. Give it to me, or I will kill you and then take it!"

The Soldier Hercules spoke with the fierceness of a deadly resolve.

The paymaster was not a man to be bullied, and he sprang to his feet.

There was a revolver on the table, half-hidden by the money, and his grasp was upon it, and he said sternly:

"Mister Hercules, two can play at the game of life and death, so hands up, or I fire!"

Quick as a flash, the Hercules made a spring, and the revolver was in his iron grasp as it exploded.

Unhurt, he wrenched it from the paymaster, whose finger touched the trigger at the unlucky instant when the muzzle was pointed toward him, and with the second report he fell upon the floor a dying man.

Seizing the money, the now maddened Hercules bounded out of the door, the revolver in his grasp, and heard the alarm sounded.

There, across the street, he saw a horse standing before the quarters of Buffalo Bill.

A moment more he was in the saddle and dashing toward the stockade gate.

"There has been a murder, sentinel, and Colonel Carter sent me to overhaul the fugitive who passed out of the other gate," said the Her-

cules, and as the sentinel stood in indecision, he drove spurs into his horse and dashed over him.

The man fell heavily and the Hercules passed on, unbound the gate and was the next instant flying over the moonlit plain.

So sudden had been the attack, so short the time between the two shots in the paymaster's quarters and the escape of the Hercules, that nothing had been done to intercept him.

The "long roll" was sounded, and the men turned out rapidly.

The officer next to the paymaster heard the shots, and when half-dressed said that they had come from his neighbor's quarters, he thought.

But the Hercules had dashed out the lamp and all was dark within, so that it was supposed that he was mistaken.

Then Buffalo Bill who was preparing to start upon a scout, came out of his cabin to find his horse gone, for he had sent his man for him a few minutes before.

Next came the alarm from the gate, where the sentinel was found, his face bleeding and himself in such a dazed condition that it was some time before he could make a report of what had occurred.

In the mean time some one had noticed that the door of the paymaster's quarters was open, and entering with a lantern the form was found upon the floor.

"He yet lives," cried Captain Rosafy, and he was at once placed in his bed and Surgeon Delamater sent for.

There was some money upon the table, more upon the floor, and all knew that a robbery had taken place.

"He has his death-wound, poor fellow," said Surgeon Delamater sadly.

"Yes, and the Soldier Hercules gave it to me."

The words were uttered with a strength that surprised all; but they were the last he ever spoke, and a strange feeling fell upon all who heard them, and, but for the report of the sentinel, no one would have believed them true.

Instantly Buffalo Bill and his entire scout band mounted in hot haste and started upon the trail of the daring murderer.

But after two days they came back, weary and without success, for they followed the trail of a man as skilled as themselves in border craft.

The Soldier Hercules had made good his escape, and the brand of outlaw was upon him.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HERCULES HIGHWAYMAN.

A COACH on the Overland Trail running from Omaha over the Rocky Mountains, and thence on to the flourishing State of California, was going along on its run not very many miles from Fort M—, when Bob Burt, the driver, was asked by a passenger who sat upon the box with him, if there was much danger of meeting highwaymen on the way.

"Ef yer means read-agents, pard, I guess the chances is small hereabout," responded Bob Burt, who was a noted prince of the reins, and the hero of many a hair-breadth adventure while on his drives over plain and mountain.

"I have heard there are some robbers known as Mounted Miners, from the fact that they only take gold, and are on horseback."

"Waal, yas, there be sich outlaws on the trails, but they is working mostly down among ther mines, whar branch lines of our company goes, yer know."

"You have been stopped quite often, I guess?"

"Waal, yas, they has held me up many times, and more they has shot lead inter me, too, when I wasn't over-auxious ter draw rein."

"Them Mounted Miners yer spoke of hes give our line a tarn also, and there be a man captain of 'em who hain't afeerd o' anything, they says."

"I have heard of him, if you mean Captain Coyote, who was down on the Mexican and Texas trails."

"That's him; and he has a right arm o' Satan with him for an officer they calls Yankee Kit, and I only hopes they'll keep clear o' this run o' mine, pard."

"I hope so for your sake, driver, as well as my own, for I am pretty rich just now, having some few thousands in cash with me."

"Yas, it would be bad for 'em ter strike yer, pard, but I has no idea but we'll git through all serene on this run," and Bob Burt touched up his leaders, and the team of six horses went along at a slapping pace, for the road just there was very good.

The stranger on the box looked like a man

who was in good circumstances—perhaps a merchant from San Francisco going East to buy goods.

In the coach were several other passengers, from the looks of them all bordermen, one with the appearance of a miner, and a poor one.

"Hello, who is that?" suddenly said Bob Burt, and immediately after he added:

"Your money is all right, pard, for that is soldiers on the trail, and they is in force, for that one is a big officer."

As he spoke he pointed with his whip ahead, where a horseman was seen in full uniform.

He stood stationary in the trail, and his gaze was upon the coach.

He was dressed in a handsome uniform, with epaulettes, military saddle and all, while the stars upon the epaulettes showed that he was a general in rank.

His horse was jet-black, large, long-limbed and seemed fully capable of bearing his master, who was a man of remarkably large physique.

As the coach drew near, he held up his hand to bring it to a halt, and Bob Burt at once drew rein, while he gave a salute with his whip, with the remark:

"Your servant, general."

"Who is he?" asked the passenger on the box with the driver.

"Guess he's the inspectin' general going the rounds o' the forts," replied Bob Burt.

"My man, I have halted you to know something of your passengers."

"Yes, general."

"I am in search of a paymaster and his clerk, who have robbed the Government of considerable money, and are trying to make their way east in disguise."

"Yas, general, I hope you'll catch the thieves."

"Here is the description of the men, driver, and they should be due on the Overland at this point about this time."

"I see, general."

The general then drew a paper from his pocket, and riding closer to the stage, read aloud, in a deep, stern voice, as follows:

"Paymaster Bressingham, a man of forty, with a black mustache, worn long, and beard of two weeks' growth, slightly gray on the chin.

"Dark eyes, long lashes, a scar on the forehead, dressed in citizens' clothes, and with hair cut short."

"Pard, that fits you as tho' yer was made for it," said the driver to the passenger.

"My God! what can it mean?" gasped the man.

"It means, sir, that you are my man—up with your hands, sir!" and the general leveled his revolver.

"I obey, sir, because I am at your mercy; but there is a sad mistake here."

"I am responsible for all mistakes, sir. Here, driver, put these irons upon his wrists, and you must carry him on to the next station for me, where my officers and men are."

"I'm sorry, pard, but what the general says goes," and Bob Burt took the handcuffs and placed them upon the wrists of the unfortunate passenger.

"Now, driver, look in his pockets and you will find several thousand dollars there, which hand to me."

"It is my money, and you'll rue this, be your rank what it may," said the passenger.

But the driver found the money and handed it over.

"Now, driver, I wish to have a look at your other passengers," and the officer again raised the paper and seemed to be reading it over.

"Turn out, pilgrims, fer the general ter hev a look at yer, and ther Lord hev marcy on the one who is guilty."

"Turn out, I says, for what the general says goes!"

Thus urged, the five passengers in the coach got out, and the general cast his eyes earnestly over the group.

Then he said:

"Gentlemen, I regret to disturb you, but one of your number is my prisoner, or else this description is wrong."

"I will read it to you:

"The paymaster's clerk is a man of thirty, quite stout, with red hair and beard, the latter lately cut off."

"Has on the dress of a miner, red shirt, black pants, belt with revolvers and knife, and stoops a little when standing up."

"He is traveling with the paymaster, but they pretend not to know each other."

"The clerk also has some of the Government funds with him."

"You are my man," and the general dropped

his revolver upon the miner, who answered exactly to the description he had read.

"You has ther drop on me, pard, and ef yer hadn't I caves when a general says so; but I guess yer'll find yer has ther wrong pig by ther ear this time, as yer'll see when I proves who I is," and the red-headed miner took his arrest very coolly.

"Hand over your money, sir, and, driver, put these irons upon him."

Bob Burt sprung from his box and obeyed, taking a leather wallet from his boot-leg, well filled with bank-notes, and then clapping the irons upon his wrists, with the remark:

"What ther general says goes, Pard Red-Head."

"Yer don't look like a thief, but looks is painful deceivin' sometimes."

"Now, general, yer servant."

"Thank you, my man."

"Your name, please?"

"Bob Burt, sir."

"A new hand in this part of the run, I take it?"

"Yes, general, but an old hand with the ribbons."

"I shall see that you are remembered, Mr. Burt, for you have rendered the Government valuable services."

"Drive on now to your next relay station, and you will find my officers and escort there."

"I will follow and relieve you of your prisoners."

"Gentlemen, I regret to have detained you," and raising his plumed hat, the general turned his horse in behind the coach, which went rolling rapidly on its way.

Arriving at the station Bob Burt saw no soldiers there, but his fellow-driver who was ready to carry the coach on said:

"Bob, orders has come for us to look out for a man on the trails who does his robbing alone."

"He has come along the trails from Omaha and has struck a dozen coaches and known just who ter tap for funds, showin' he were posted."

"They calls him ther Hercules Highwayman, and some do say he are the big soldier that kilt ther paymaster three months ago at Fort M—and got away; but he hev promoted himself, for he is rigged out in the full uniform of a general, and—Lordy! has yer gone mad?"

But the speaker could say no more, for Bob Burt burst forth with such a string of profanity that all eyes were turned upon him.

At last he became calm enough to say:

"Pard, I hev met ther general, an' ef I hain't ther livin' identical image o' a born fool, then call me names to suit yer taste."

"I tells yer I hev met ther general, and more, he jist got me ter rob two o' my passengers fer him, and ter put their irons on 'em ter boot."

"Oh! friends, kick me ef yer please, for I are thet gentle I might be tuk fer Mary's leetle lamb."

"Won't somebody call me a fool, so I kin say 'Thank ye?'"

Then the story came out, and Bob set himself to work to get the irons off of his two passengers, who seemed to feel sorry for his distress, and both said that they had foolishly let it be known that they had money with them, and thus the "general" had found it out.

Before Bob went out on his next run westward, a placard was sent to the station which read:

"\$5,000.00 REWARD!

"HEADQUARTERS, Fort M—

"It having come to my knowledge that one, Sol Soule, late corporal I Co.—th Cavalry, U. S. Army, and who murdered an officer at this fort, robbed him and deserting made his escape, is now upon the Overland holding up coaches as a road-agent, I hereby offer the above reward \$5000.00 for him, *dead or alive*.

"The said Soule is dressed in the full uniform of a general of the U. S. Army, rides a large black horse, with military saddle and bridle, and is called the Hercules Highwayman, from his enormous size, for his height is six feet four inches and his weight little short of 300 lbs.

"RUSSELL CARTER,
"Colonel Commanding
"Military District No.—."

CHAPTER XV.

A MEETING BY MOONLIGHT.

WHEN it became known that the Soldier Hercules had not really left the border but had daringly entered upon the life of a road-agent, almost under the shadow of Fort M—, many were the oaths of his old comrades among scouts and soldiers to capture him.

His murder of the paymaster, and the fact that he had become a bravo, throwing defiance

in their teeth moved them to this, as well as the fact that Colonel Carter offered the very liberal reward of five thousand dollars for his body, dead or alive.

Then the Overland company had duplicated the reward of the Government, while the miners and settlers along the stage trails had chipped in a third reward of a couple of thousand.

Of course the total of twelve thousand dollars for the body of a murderer, a deserter, a robber and an outlaw, *dead or alive*, was sufficient to send many a man on his trail.

But the Giant General, as they began to call him on account of his uniform, was as wary as he was daring, and no one seemed to know just where to look for him.

Detectives had gone in the coaches, hoping to catch him, but just those coaches would never be held up by the bold road-agent.

Soldiers obtained leave and in squads haunted the trails, to give up in despair of catching him, and Buffalo Bill and his scouts took the trails for several weeks with a like result.

Still every now and then a coach was held up by the Giant General, who seemed to know just which ones to strike for money.

Then, too, the Mounted Miners, under a leader known as Yankee Kit, who had a silent commander who was never seen by his men, emboldened by the career of the Giant General, had begun to make the traveling on the Overland very dangerous work.

These Mounted Miners were few in number, a dozen it was said, but they were ably handled, and their leader was a man to dread.

Well mounted and armed, and men who were fearless, they struck the coaches seldom, but always to win.

Yankee Kit, their captain in the field, was a long-legged, gaunt fellow, with a cunning, cadaverous face and the eye of an eagle.

He had little to say to his men, ruled them with a rod of iron, and woe be unto the man who disobeyed his orders.

He had no special retreat, but each man had his own lair, and after holding up a stage would go to it, meeting by a call of Yankee Kit when he had work to do, for he would make the rounds and give his men a date and rendezvous when he needed them.

One moonlight night Bob Burt's stage was brought to a halt by the call of a passenger inside, who asked how far it was back to the station he had lately left.

"Only a mile, sir."

"Very well, I will get out and walk back, for I am too sick to go on, my man."

"I am sorry, sir, and I guess Zip Breslin will look after yer well, and I'd drive yer back if it wasn't ag'in orders."

"Oh no, I would rather walk, for it may do me good," and the passenger started back on the trail as the coach rolled on.

But he halted at once, when the coach was out of sight and began to pace to and fro, as though waiting for some one.

He was a man of fine physique, dressed in black and had the air of a gentleman.

Soon he stopped in his walk and listened.

"He is coming," he said quietly, and in a few minutes a horseman came in sight and gave a low call.

It was answered by the man in the trail who then said:

"Come on, Kit, for it is I."

The horseman rode up and dismounting remarked:

"I hardly knew you this time, cap'n, in that parson-like rig, you look so dismal; but what excuse did you give 'em this time?"

"Oh, that I was too ill to go on and would walk back to the station."

"You are a good one, sir, for one time you appear as a woman in black, then as an old man, next as a fat man, then as a priest, and so on, for you can disguise yourself better than anybody I ever saw."

"Well, I never come over the road that I don't give you a good pointer as to which hearse to halt and what you'll get by it, do I?"

"No indeed, captain, you are posted; but what's on this time?"

"A speculator goes through to 'Frisco one week from to-day, in Bob Burt's coach, and he'll carry some ten thousand in cash with him."

"He will be on crutches, pretending to have been shot, and the money will be in the bandages on his leg, so look out for him."

"He'll not go through with the coach, captain."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing to tap now; but I want my share."

"Here it is, sir, a clean two thousand, and I have the value in bills for myself and the men,

for I shall camp at my lay-out to-night near the Blue Water Spring, and start at dawn for the round of the dens, to pay the boys off and tell them to be on hand for the man on crutches one week from to-day."

"All right; but you are dividing squarely with me, Kit?"

"Upon my honor, yes, captain."

"Well, I hope so, for if I should trip you, it will be the last of Yankee Kit on the Overland."

"I do not fear threats, captain, and you know me too well to doubt me, for we have been pards a long time."

"You are chief, I admit, though you take few risks."

"But I spy out prizes, and report them."

"True, sir, and I take all risks to get the prizes."

"Very well, we will not quarrel, but I leave all to you."

"Now tell me if you have heard more of this man they call the Giant General?"

"Only that he makes a ten-strike now and then, and has caught several prizes of ours before they reached my hands."

"He is a dangerous fellow, and it would be well to trail him to his den and rob him."

"Of course you mean to kill him first."

"Oh, yes, for from all accounts he would not be a healthy man to rob while alive."

"I've tried to trail him, but he is as cunning as an Indian; but I'll keep on the watch for him, and I guess will catch him some time, and it will pay, I am sure."

"Yes, no doubt of it; but I must go back to the station, now."

"And I to my den at the Blue Spring, for I start at dawn to pay the men off, and you know each man has a separate camp."

"That is right—good-night," and thrusting the roll of bills, given him by Yankee Kit, into his bosom, the gentleman in black, and really the chief of the Mounted Rifles, walked away down the trail, while the other mounted his horse and started off into the hills to the left of the road.

As they disappeared the form of a man came from behind a rock not ten feet from where they had been seated.

Stepping into the moonlight the face and form of the Giant General was revealed.

"Now to interview the gentleman in black," he muttered, and returning to the side of the trail he disappeared in the shadows of the dense timber that lined the road at that point.

CHAPTER XVI.

DOG-EAT-DOG.

WHEN the Soldier Hercules left the trail and went into the timber, he ran down a hill to a valley, where his horse awaited him.

Springing into the saddle he rode swiftly for half a mile, and once more turned into the Overland Trail at a point where there was a large rock jutting out into the road, like the prow of a ship.

The moonlight fell upon the spot, and revealed the magnificent horse and rider in all their grand proportions, and it seemed sad indeed that such a specimen of manhood should be devoting his life to the infamous deeds of a footpad.

But there he sat, a repeating-rifle of the latest pattern across his saddle, his uniform, weapons and gold hat cord glistening brightly, a picture for an artist, while his horse, still as a statue, with his fine trappings awaiting the will of his master in all its boldness.

Adown the trail at a swinging pace, little like the sick man he had claimed to be, came the silent partner, or chief of the Mounted Miners.

A highwayman himself he little dreamed of harm to him, that the tables might be turned upon him.

The station was but a quarter of a mile away, and he could soon be in fairly comfortable quarters at rest, for he was tired after a couple of days' journey by stage over a rough trail.

He had in his breast-pocket a roll of bills amounting to two thousand dollars, with a little spare supply of a couple of hundreds also, not given him by his pard in lawless deeds, Yankee Kit.

Then there was a larger amount back where he had his quarters, in safety from the perilous life of a road-agent, and prospects for more.

So the chief was well content with himself and the world in general.

As he rounded the huge rock he came to a sudden halt, for he saw a picture of magnificence in the shape of a horse and rider which he had not counted upon.

It barred his way, too, in a style that left him no chance to fly or fight.

A rifle was at the shoulder of the horseman, and the muzzle, not ten feet from him, covered his heart.

Then came the command:

"Don't throw your life away, pard, for your money, so hand over your spare change!"

"The Giant General!" exclaimed the road-agent chief, involuntarily.

"Yes, and you heard my command, so hand over your money, and don't force me to take it from your dead body."

It was a new sensation for the outlaw chief to be himself robbed by the king of road-agents, the Giant General.

But he was like many others when he held the revolver, at the mercy of the Hercules Highwayman.

As the moonlight fell full upon him it revealed a man of striking appearance, tall, well-formed, and appearing like one little like the footpad, in his courtly manner and gentlemanly appearance.

He was brought to bay, and with the odds against him.

Simply he was in a situation in which many a time he had placed some unfortunate himself.

Armed he was, to the teeth, but playing the traveling gentleman as he was, his arms did not show, and hence was not so easily seized upon as he could wish, as they would have been under different circumstances.

Often Captain Coyote, as his men only knew him, had wondered how it was that men had often surrendered to him without resistance, without taking the chances of life to protect their property.

He had often held up a whole coach-load, and set them down as a pack of cowards.

Now the situation was reversed.

He could appreciate the feelings of others in like fix.

Such thoughts surged like lightning through his brain, and cleverly caught, he determined to cleverly get out of the situation.

So he said:

"I have no intention, sir, to throw away my life for a couple of paltry hundred dollars I have with me, so I give them to you with pleasure, considering it a cheap price to allow me the pleasure of seeing the famous Hercules Highwayman."

"You are complimentary, sir, indeed; but just now a couple of hundred dollars will do me no good, for I want more."

"You have heard the old saying, general, that one cannot get blood out of a turnip."

"Oh, yes; but I can get blood out of a man, and it seems that you are going to force me to do it."

"Hand over the large sum you carry with you, and keep the couple of hundreds for traveling expenses."

"My dear sir, I have told you—"

"A lie, for men of your caliber don't go with a few hundreds in their pocket."

"Come, my horse is restless at my forbearance, so do not detain me."

"Do you wish to search me?"

"I never search a live man," was the significant response, so significant in fact that it caused Captain Coyote to start, realizing that he was trifling with a very dangerous man, from all accounts he had heard of him.

So he said:

"I have with me a couple of thousand dollars which are not mine, for they belong to a lady friend whose attorney I am, and, poor woman, the loss will be irreparable to her."

"The loss will fall upon you, not the lady."

"Hand over the money."

With a sigh Captain Coyote thrust his hand into his breast pocket, but hesitated at the stern warning:

"If that hand is withdrawn quickly, or with aught else in it than money, my rifle goes off on the instant."

There was a revolver in the breast-pocket, nicely concealed by a handkerchief and leather wallet, but this very summary advice checked the inspiration in Captain Coyote's mind to kill the Giant General.

He had confidence in himself, and in his aim, also his quickness of movement if ever he could get half a chance with a revolver.

Then too the reward of twelve thousand dollars for the body of the Giant General was a great temptation, and why should he not have it?

But the grand-looking horseman read him like a book, and he was forced to draw out the wallet and leave the revolver.

"Thank you, my friend, I will not forget

you; but may I ask you why I find a gentleman of your make-up alone on foot on the Overland Trail at midnight?"

"I was going west by stage, but felt ill, so got out to walk back to the station, where we had supper, and I felt that I could get rest for a day or two."

"I am sorry I have but added to your illness, but as an attorney you will soon even up upon some of your clients, for lawyers never get left in the long run."

"Now you had better go on, as this night air may be injurious to you; *au revoir*, permit me to say, for we shall meet again."

"I sincerely hope not."

"All the same we will, so *au revoir*."

The worsted outlaw took the hint and with a muttered curse moved away.

Once he half-hesitated, as though determined to draw a revolver and take chances with the mighty horseman.

But a glance over his shoulder revealed the rifle-muzzle still covering him, and he went on his way in silence.

As he disappeared, a low laugh came from the lips of the Giant General, and then the words:

"That was certainly a case of *dog eat dog*, and I am not done yet with the feast of canine, for there are more of them to hold up."

"It will be a great joke for me, a sad reality to them."

"Yes, I will begin at daylight, so comes, good Blizzard," and he patted his horse affectionately.

"We must be on the trail of Yankee Kit at dawn."

CHAPTER XVII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

THE sun was not yet up when Yankee Kit mounted his horse at his lonely little cabin in the very end of a canyon, and wended his way over a rocky trail upon his mission to visit the dozen different members of the band known as the Mounted Miners.

There was safety in every man thus living apart, some two to three miles separating each camp, for after a raid, or holding up a stage, they could scatter to their various homes, and any one finding them there saw only the evidence of a miner's lay-out, with pick, shovel and diggings to carry out the idea.

As gold in some quantities had been found in these mountains, it did not seem amiss that a few miners should be scattered about among them.

The soldiers, or scouts, thus coming upon a man dwelling alone in the mountains, with every evidence about him of being a miner, would never connect him with the lawless band of road-agents known as the Mounted Miners.

Hence it was that the Mounted Miners could never be run to earth, as those on the hunt for them always searched for a camp of a dozen or more outlaws.

In this solitary camping of his men, Yankee Kit showed great wisdom, and as he knew, through his spy chief, when to make a haul, it was easy enough to take a day and collect his men at a given rendezvous, as it cost him only a day's riding, for thirty miles covered the twelve solitary camps he had to make the rounds of.

So Yankee Kit, mounted upon his strong and fleet iron-gray mare, armed to the teeth, and chuckling as he rode along at his good-luck, started upon his round of visits.

"I'm making a good thing of it, that is certain, for I am getting just about double what I give the chief.

"Well, why should I not, for is not mine the risk, while he simply goes from station to station and learns of what there is for me to catch."

"He is in no danger, while I am daily in deadly peril."

"He was satisfied with two thousand, when I told him the amount of our last haul was but five thousand, and he knows the men demand a great deal, and have to be kept in horses, arms, clothes and ammunition, so expenses and pay for thirteen of us have to come out of the balance, only the balance happens to be several thousand over what I told him."

"Well, I must lay up all I can, for sooner or later my life will be the forfeit if I cling to this lawless career."

"When I get a snug sum I can retire from the road, disappear mysteriously, and once more turn up in my old home a rich man, claiming to have made it as a miner."

"Well, I am a miner, only I get out of pockets what other miners dig out of the ground."

And so musing as he rode along, Yankee Kit went on his way.

And hardly had he departed from his cabin before a head appeared over a boulder taking in the situation.

Then a man appeared and it was the Giant General.

Going to the little cabin he looked about him with considerable interest.

The tiny house was of logs, and built under a cliff, among a group of mountain cedars, in the very end of a wild-looking canyon.

A pick and several shovels stood against the door, which was fastened by a padlock and chain.

Taking a bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket the Giant General, after several trials, opened the door and entered.

All was the pink of neatness within, and the cabin was by no means uncomfortable to live in.

For some time the Giant General stood regarding the place attentively, as though searching for something.

Then he muttered:

"He is too smart a man to keep his money in here, where the burning of his cabin would destroy it."

"I must look elsewhere."

So he relocked the door and after searching outside his keen eyes detected a rocky shelf some twenty feet from the ground.

There seemed to be a small cavity there, and a tree grew near it.

Examining the tree closely, he saw that it had the appearance of having been often climbed.

So up it he went and came in view of a very small cave upon the rocky shelf, and something like a bundle in it.

Descending he looked about for a pole to reach the shelf, and upon the top of the cabin found the very thing, something very like a shepherd's crook.

Ascending the tree with this he reached over and catching the object drew it toward him, when it rolled over the edge and unrolled into a rope ladder.

"Aha! Yankee Kit is a clever one," he said, and it took him but a very short time to descend the tree and ascend the ladder.

There, back in the little cave he found the upper end of the ladder fastened with irons driven into crevices of the rocks; but behind this was a box, and it was locked.

The skeleton keys were brought into use again, the box was opened and the treasure was revealed.

"Twenty thousand if there is a dollar—a snug little fortune indeed."

"Now to follow my friend, Yankee Kit."

With this he replaced all as he found it and rolling up the rope ladder pushed it up with the crook, when again ascending the tree he pushed it into place.

The crook was replaced upon the cabin roof, and going to the shed, where the man kept his horses, for one was yet there, showing that he owned two animals, the Giant General cleverly examined the tracks of the steed which Yankee Kit had ridden away.

Below the cabin the ground was rocky, so that even iron-shod hoofs left no tracks; but beyond was a spring of vast dimensions, the stream from it pouring quite a little brook that flowed down the canyon.

To this spring came the prowling beasts of the forests to drink, and there were deer and even buffalo tracks as well.

This was the Blue Spring, for its waters were so deep and pure they seemed blue, and it appeared to be at the head of the canyon, with its overhanging rocks, while the numberless tracks going to and from it would readily hide the trail of the outlaw to his little cabin further on.

Going over the ridge the Giant General found his horse where had left him, and riding to the entrance to the cabin took up the trail of Yankee Kit's horse.

A perfect trailer he followed it readily, while the horse had not been so long gone by but that his own steed could take the scent, and did so, following unerringly.

A ride of three miles brought the Giant General in sight of a small cabin perched upon a hill, and he saw a man standing not far away observing him with considerable interest.

"Ho, pard, I would like to find Yankee Kit."

"Have you seen him go by this way?" called out the Giant General.

"No, I hain't."

"You know him, then?"

"No, I don't."

"Then no one has gone by on this trail?"

"I hain't seen no one."

"You are mining here, are you not?"

"Yes, I be."

"Does your work pan out well?"

"No."

"You get some little gold, though?"

"I hain't no fool ter work for nuthin'."

"Well, I want it," and the Hercules, who had now nearly reached the spot where the man stood, dropped his rifle upon him.

The man was taken wholly aback, though he had his hand very near his revolver-butt.

Turning pale, he said:

"What does yer want with me?"

"Nothing, I only want your money."

"I hain't got none."

"Oh, yes you have."

"I says I hain't."

"Well, as I differ with you, I will give you a chance to decide which I shall take, your money or your life."

"You wouldn't kill a poor honest man, for the little he has dug out of the ground, would yer?"

"Yes, as readily as I would kill a buffalo for his robe."

"Hand over your money, for you keep it upon you, I am sure."

With a groan the man drew from his pocket a roll of bills.

"Thar be two hundred dollars, pard, ail I has."

"Very well, this will do for the present; but I must see that you don't dog my steps and kill me, so I will tie you to prevent your getting free for a while at least."

"Come with me to your cabin."

With a quick movement the Giant General dismounted and had his grip upon the man.

It was useless for the outlaw to struggle, for he was in the hands of one whose strength was such that he felt like a child in his grasp.

Disarming him, the Giant General carried him to his cabin and with a lariat quickly bound him in a chair, and bound him not so he could free himself, but that he would remain secure until freed by some one else.

"Now, my man, I'll mark you down as number one on my list, and the sum I got from you was two hundred dollars."

"To-morrow at furthest you will be freed, if I live, and if not, you stand a good chance to die of starvation."

"Good-morning," and the Giant General mounted and rode on his way, after glancing about the place and discovering that the mounted miner had a horse in the little shed back of his cabin.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TWO OF A KIND.

YANKEE KIT had his dozen outlaw followers so placed, as to their horses, that they formed something like a horseshoe in shape, counting from the first cabin on one side, three miles from his own retreat, to the twelfth cabin on the other side at about an equal distance.

Thus, when he had gone the rounds he was quite near to his own cabin, and, on account of the rough trails now and then to pass over it was generally late in the afternoon when he reached his own retreat.

He had gone from cabin to cabin, paying each man his lawless earnings, amounting to two hundred dollars to the man, and had told them to remain ready for a minute's call, but to be sure and be, if they did not hear from him in the mean time, at a certain rendezvous on the Overland to aid in holding up the coach which was to have on board the pretended lame man on crutches, which Captain Coyote had told him of.

When he halted his horse at the Blue Spring for water, he started at the sound of a human voice and quickly threw himself upon the defensive.

"Don't be a fool, Kit, for I thought you knew my rich-toned voice," and Captain Coyote stepped out from among the rocks.

"Ah, captain, you gave me a fright indeed; but when did you come?"

"Half an hour ago, for I supposed you would be coming off your rounds by this time."

"Yes, I am just back; but how did you know where to find me?"

"You said last night that your cabin was near the Blue Spring, so I asked the way to it back at the station, as it is said the water has medicinal properties, and you know I claim to be ill," and Captain Coyote laughed.

"But did no one follow you?"

"Oh, no, for why should they, seeing as how I am only an invalid gentleman, stopping off a day at the station."

"Well, captain, is there anything wrong, that you have come?"

"Decidedly, yes."

Yankee Kit looked uneasy and then said:

"Well, come into the cabin and we'll talk it over."

He led the way, and throwing open his door gave the chief a seat.

"Now, sir, what is it?"

"Do you know the Giant General, Kit?"

"No, sir, and I have no desire to make his acquaintance."

"I have the advantage of you."

"You know him?"

"Intimately."

"You never spoke of this last night?"

"I had not the honor of his acquaintance then."

"Ah! Has he been to the station?"

"No; but I do not doubt but that he would go there if he wished, for Kit, that man is a dandy."

"So I have heard, sir, and he must be, to play a lone hand at highwayman as he does."

"But, when did you meet him?"

"Last night, after leaving you."

"Ah!"

"He was seated upon his horse, behind a large rock that juts into the trail like the bow of a vessel—"

"I know it."

"The moonlight revealed both base and sides distinctly, and I have to confess that I had never seen so magnificent a pair; animal and man were perfect."

"Yes, and—"

"He simply had the drop on me with his rifle, and held me up."

"Robbed you?"

"Yes."

"Can this be true?"

"As gospel."

"You did not resist?"

"I am no born fool, Yankee Kit, to gamble when I have no hand to play."

"But this seems so strange that you, of all men, should be robbed upon the trail."

"I say it was positively funny, Kit; but it was true."

"You had to give up all you had?"

"Oh, no, only the two thousand you paid me last night."

"Only that?"

"Yes."

"You had more, of course?"

"A few hundreds."

"And these escaped his eyes."

"Oh, no, he bade me keep my pocket change."

"He was kind."

"So I thought; but the fact stands that I was held up by the Giant General and robbed, and I wish you to play your cards to get it back."

"I will."

"Play your cards right and the game is big."

"How do you mean?"

"Track him to his den and you will get his winnings with his life."

"You are right, captain, and I will do it," and Yankee Kit seemed as though he was nervous from the presence of his chief at his cabin.

At last, to his great relief, Captain Coyote arose to go, and said:

"Well, I must go back to the station, for it is a good hour's walk, and I will depend on tomorrow's stage eastward; but keep a lookout for the man on crutches, and don't forget the Giant General, for he will pan out rich, I am sure."

"I will be back again in some disguise, in about two weeks, or so."

"Good-by," and the chief walked off, while Yankee Kit followed to see that he took the trail to the station, five miles away.

Having looked to his horses, Yankee Kit prepared his supper, which was by no means a frugal meal, as the outlaw was very fond of good living, and secured the best that he could obtain.

Then, as darkness had come on he sat down to his table and began to figure up his earnings, a custom of his after every financial transaction that he had.

"Well, I am getting along, and if I can arrange to corral the Giant General it will be a big haul for me, I am sure."

"I was afraid that the captain was going to strike me for some wealth, after losing his two thousand, but he did not."

"Now I wonder if he really met the general, or this is some game of his for some reason unknown to me."

"He is tricky as a mouse and his friendship for me is just about as sincere as mine for him."

"Well, this is a perilous business all around, and I deserve all I can make out of it."

With this the outlaw prepared himself for bed and slept through the night as calmly as though his heart, brain and hands were not stained and weighted with crime.

When, soon after dawn, he awoke, and threw open his door, he started at beholding a rifle muzzle thrust in his face and the tall form of the Giant General confronting him, while the words fell dismally upon his ears:

"Yankee Kit, I have called to renew our acquaintance!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A SURPRISE FOR YANKEE KIT.

THE words of the Giant General to Yankee Kit amazed that individual more than enough.

He did not remember to have ever met the man before him, yet his words said that he had come to "renew his acquaintance with him."

But Kit was caught, and so unsuspecting of danger was he that his belt of arms hung by his bunk, and he had no weapon about him.

Mentally cursing himself for his carelessness, he demanded:

"Who are you?"

"I am surprised that an old friend does not remember me; but, let me tell you, at once, that I mean you no harm, and only got the drop on you to prevent your getting it upon me."

"When one rings a door-bell in this country, you know, he must be prepared to meet the man he visits with whatever is most handy."

"Now you are quite a rich man, Kit, and I wish to share your fortune with you."

"Ah, yes, you have come to rob me?"

"Certainly."

"You said you meant me no harm."

"Bodily harm, I meant, if you did not cause me to shoot you."

"Well, it's little money you'll find in a poor miner's cabin."

"Very true, but I am looking to find more in the cabin of a rich mountain miner."

The flush that had come back to Yankee Kit's face left it at this, and he stammered:

"I do not understand!"

"Sit there!"

The Hercules pointed to a bench, and the man obeyed; he dared not do otherwise.

"Hold out your hands!"

He muttered a curse, but obeyed, and a pair of handcuffs were clasped upon the wrists.

"Now to hopple you, Kit, and we can talk better together, with no prospect of a row."

"Man, or demon, we have met before, but where, oh, where?" and Kit ground the words between his teeth in his rage.

"Now, Kit, I want you to share with me your fortune, for I will not touch over half what you have."

"There is nothing else for me to do, for I am in your power."

"Then where is your money?"

"In my coat pocket, hanging yonder."

The general stepped to where the coat hung, found the leather wallet in the pocket, and coming back to where Kit sat, opened it.

"Let me see," he said, counting out the money as he spoke.

"You have some four hundred dollars here."

"Yes."

"It is all you have?"

"Every dollar I have in the world, all I am worth, save my cabin, traps here, and horses."

"And you give half to me?"

"I can do nothing else."

"You are generous."

"Oh, no, I am acting from necessity."

"And this is all?"

"I told you so."

"True."

"But you do not believe me?"

"No."

"Well, search the cabin, and every dollar you can find, you can have."

"Suppose I search the cave out yonder up in the rocks?"

"My God!"

The man's face was more pallid now with fear of losing his money, than at the thought even of death.

"Ah! my remark hit dead-center, and you see that I know you lied to me."

"Yes, I know your hiding-place for your treasure, and let me tell you, Kit, that I do not intend to rob you of it, or to take even this money here."

"What do you mean?" and Yankee Kit brightened up considerably.

"Just what I say."

"You have already robbed me."

"Oh, no, I would not be so mean to an old friend."

"Again I ask who are you?"

"I will tell you—Roger Ross."

"Ha! you know me?" and the man fairly trembled.

"Oh, yes, for we were boys together, Roger; but you never thought that the slender little fellow whom you once kicked and cuffed about at school, and made a slave of when you were the bully of the village in dear old Tennessee, would ever become the giant, the Hercules you now find me."

"Solomon Soulette! now I know you!" and Yankee Kit was a picture of amazement.

"Yes, and I will let you free, Roger, and we will talk over old times together, and I'll have breakfast with you."

He unfastened the handcuffs as he spoke, untied the rope about his legs, and Yankee Kit was free, and held forth his hand with the remark:

"Well, Sol, I am glad to see you; but what a surprise to me to find you my old school chum."

"I left home, you know, before you were more than half-grown, and all I ever heard of you after was that you had killed Peter Kennedy and left the country."

"But how did you know me?"

"My dear Roger, as a man you are only a larger edition of exactly what you were as a boy, and if a detective from the old village was on your track—don't look so frightened, for I am only supposing a case, and say if one was on your trail—who knew you as a boy, he'd place you in an instant now."

"You never were a beauty, Roger, and age has but ripened your ugliness of face and form."

"Now let us have breakfast, and then we can talk over matters."

"You have not touched my treasure?"

"Go and see for yourself."

"No, I believe you; but you then are the terrible Soldier Hercules who killed the paymaster at Fort M—, and have been on the road as a lone highwayman?"

"Yes."

"They tell wondrous stories of you, Solomon, and you must be rich from your robberies."

"I am pretty well to do, thank you, for I know you ask from deep interest in your old schoolfellow."

"But how did you find me out?"

"That is one of my secrets that I must keep; but let me tell you that I am anxious to join your band."

"What band?"

"Bah, Roger, don't be silly."

"I do not comprehend."

"Then I will say right out, the band of Mounted Miners, of whom you are acting captain, with Captain Coyote as silent partner and real chief."

"My God! you are a detective."

"Nothing of the kind; I am, as you just said, a fugitive from justice, with a price upon my head—in plain words, the Hercules Highwayman, Giant General, or whatever else you are pleased to call me."

"Then how did you know me as captain of the Mounted Miners?"

"By observation."

"You observe closely."

"I have to in my profession, Roger; but, as I said, I wish to join your band of Mounted Miners."

"Our ranks are full."

"Well, stretch the number with me."

"How do you know the number?"

"You have twelve men under you, and you and the chief make fourteen."

"Now stick to your number of twelve men, privates so to speak, and make me a lieutenant under you."

"That will arrange it to the satisfaction of all."

"The chief would not consent."

"Oh yes he would, for he's a very clever fellow and likes me."

"Does he know you?"

"Intimately, I assure you," and the Giant General enjoyed a hearty laugh, but Yankee Kit failed to see the joke and said so.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HERCULES HOLDS TRUMPS.

"You don't see anything to laugh at when I tell you that Captain Coyote, your chief, knows me intimately?"

"No."

"Why he knows me so well that he loaned me two thousand dollars simply for the asking!"

Yankee Kit thought he understood now, for he remembered what the chief had told him the night before and how he had doubted the story.

"You robbed him?"

"Don't put it so harshly, Roger—"

"Call me Kit."

"All right, a rose by any other name, you know."

"But you put it too harshly, for I asked him for a loan and he gave it to me—here is the sum, and I desire you to return it to him."

"Ah! have you struck an itinerant preacher up in these mountains and been converted?"

"Oh, no, but there is an old saying of honor among thieves, you know, and I have that feeling."

"Count that money, please, and give me a receipt for it."

The Mounted Miner obeyed to the letter.

"Now, Kit, I want to again ask to join your band."

"That you cannot do without the consent of every member."

"I know, and one has to do some deed, be put to some test to prove himself worthy of membership, I believe?"

"Yes."

"What is the test?"

"To alone hold up a coach on the Overland and rob the passengers."

"If he can do that he is all right?"

"Yes."

"Well, as far as that goes, holding up coaches alone is my profession."

"I am called by some, you know, the Lone Road-Agent."

"I think it best not to add to our number."

"Well, we will put it to the vote among the men."

"They are a good lot, and will vote for me, I think."

"What do you know about them?"

Again the Giant General laughed heartily, and again Yankee Kit did not see the joke.

"Why do you laugh?"

"I will tell you, and then we must hasten to have breakfast and go on a visit to the poor fellows."

"What poor fellows?"

"Your men."

"No, I will not show you where they are."

"Again you talk like a silly woman, Kit, for I am on visiting terms with all of them."

"You do not know them."

"Let us see if I do not."

"Here, in this roll of bills there are two hundred dollars, and they belong to one of your band who lives about three miles from here, and whom I have marked down here, on the paper I rolled around the money."

"Number One." See?"

"Yes."

"Well, I borrowed this from him yesterday, and left him bound to a chair in his cabin."

"What?"

"It is a fact, I assure you; but see, here is another roll, with a trifle more money in it, and I got this from the man I call Number Two, in lieu of a better name, and whom I left in the same fix as I did Number One."

"How did you dare go to these men?"

"Why, my dear Kit, did I not borrow two thousand from your chief?"

"Yes, and he is a desperate man to face."

"I found him as mild as a lamb."

"It is strange."

"Why, look what a name you have, Yankee Kit, as the Terror of the Trail, and here I am to breakfast with you, don't you see?"

"Solomon Soulette, you are a remarkable man, a phenomenon."

"Don't call me by the old name, for it is dead and buried."

"I am General Soule now, the Hercules Highwayman."

"But about my men?"

"I visited every one of the dozen, following upon your trail, and wherever I found them, in their camp or pretended mine, or asleep from sheer laziness, I simply played a little game of hands up with them, borrowed the cash you had paid them, and here you see are the twelve rolls, all marked by numbers up to that amount."

"And all my men you robbed?"

"Every one of them, and more, I left them all in pickle."

"In pickle?"

"Oh, yes, I left them bound in their cabins, and I will go with you to-day to return their money, release them, and put it to the vote if I am worthy of a membership in the band of Mounted Miners, after having held up and robbed the entire outfit of chief, captain and men."

greed."

But let me tell you now, as a warning, that several of those men are as desperate as death, and when they are set free they will have it out with you for this robbery and binding of them."

"I return the money, you know, and as far as having it out with me when they are free, why they were free, you know, but failed to have it out with me, as you express it."

"Very well, I will go with you as soon as I have gotten breakfast."

"Wait here until I go out and get some wood."

"Certainly; go out and see if your treasure is safe, you mean, while I build a fire with the wood now here."

"And remember, Kit, I know that you are regarded as an honest miner, and by killing me and carrying my body to Fort M—, you would get a snug reward, so I warn you that I will stand no nonsense."

"I have not robbed you, have not harmed you, have held forth the hand of friendship, after all your unkindness to me with your brute strength when I was a boy."

"But so help me God, if you attempt any trickery with me, I'll see that you hang for it, if I hang on the same gallows with you."

"Now is it war or peace between us?"

"Why peace of course, for you misunderstood me, Sol."

"I hope so; but I have warned you, and if you get the drop on me you have got to be like lightning about it, for I am quicker than a flash, so don't fool yourself about my being an overgrown lubber."

"Now you know me."

And Yankee Kit did know the man, and was cowed in spite of his own courage, which he did possess above the average.

Still he determined, when the chance offered, that he would kill the Giant General, get his money, and secure the reward offered for him dead or alive.

But for the present he felt that he could do nothing; he was too much unnerved by all that had passed, and then he might have to take one or more of his men into his confidence.

So he determined to make the best of it, and so set to work to get breakfast, after which the Giant General left to go over the ridge and get his horse, for he had approached the cabin on foot.

As he saw him disappear, Yankee Kit at once ran to see if his treasure was safe, and unable to stand the suspense of having its secret hiding-place known, he quickly recovered it and, attaching some rocks to the box, sunk it in a pool formed by the spring.

Then he mounted his horse and went down the canyon to meet the Giant General, who was a trifle late in getting there, having been delayed by watching the movements of Yankee Kit after his leaving the cabin.

"Well, pard, I am ready," he said as he rode up, and the two men set off side by side for the cabin of the man whom the Hercules had named Number One.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HERCULES AS AN ALLY.

WHEN the captain of the Mountain Miners started with the Giant General for the cabins of the twelve members of the band, he hung back to let the Hercules take the lead, and see if he really did know the trail and if all that he had told him was true.

It did not take him very long to find out, for the Hercules showed a perfect knowledge of the way, and so the two went on together until the cabin of Outlaw Number One was reached.

They found that worthy very angry, and with hands and feet swollen by the thongs, while his face was bloated with rage at being unable to release himself, and fully aware if no one came to his rescue, he would die of starvation.

When he heard the story of Yankee Kit, and his money was returned to him, while the Giant General gave him a drink from his flask to revive him, his feelings at once underwent a change, and he said frankly:

"I forgives yer, Pard General; I does for a fact, and I is proud of the friendship of any man who can handle Jerry Kip as you has done."

"I votes every time for your membership, and I says it right out that you should be an off—, and here's my hand on it."

The Giant General grasped his hand, and giving the hungry man to get his breakfast, he mounted, and with Yankee Kit went on to the next cabin.

There it was a repetition of what had occurred at the one they had just left, and the Hercules said with a smile:

"Two out of two, Kit, in favor of my membership."

"Yes," was the reply, and Yankee Kit seemed none too well pleased, in spite of his effort to appear so.

"Well, I'll wager you on the balance."

"What?"

"That nine out of the twelve agree to it."

"I'll take the bet."

"How much?"

"Say five hundred."

"Agreed," and the men rode on in silence, until Kit asked:

"What if three refuse."

"I will have the majority."

"But it will need every vote."

"I care not for that, for if I get the majority I go into the band, you mark my words, unless the chief votes against me."

"Which he will do, depend upon it."

"Why?"

"Well, he will fear you."

"On what grounds?"

"Fear that you may wish to rule."

"Oh, no, that is your fear, not his, I am sure; but I will abide by his decision, so let us drop the subject," and Yankee Kit wisely did so.

The other cabins were visited, and with a like result of the first two, with two exceptions.

These two were savage fellows, and felt that they had been wronged beyond endurance, and each one began a game of bluster as soon as he was free.

"See here, my man," and the hand of the Giant General fell upon his shoulder, and got a grip there that made the other writhe with pain.

"See here, you rob and kill at your mercy, and when the tables are turned upon you, then you wish to show fight."

"Now I played a game upon you, but return you your money, and set you free."

"Are you not satisfied?"

"No."

"Then here, take my revolver, step off ten paces and let us settle it right here."

"You have every advantage of me."

"As how?"

"I've been bound for twenty-four hours."

"True; I'll come along in a day or two."

This the man did not seem to relish, and when asked if he would vote for the Giant General to join the band, announced flatly and savagely:

"I'm durned ef I do."

"Very well, expect to see me soon, my fine fellow, and we'll even up the grudge you have against me."

So saying, the two left the cabin, and Yankee Kit set the dweller there down as a pard to help him against the Giant General should he need aid to get rid of him.

The other who acted in a like manner was also told that he might expect a visit to square up matters, and then the twelve had been heard from.

"I have won my bet, Kit, so will trouble you for the five hundred dollars."

"It's robbery."

"How?"

"You might have known the men would have feared you too much to refuse to vote against you."

"Two did, and others voted as they felt, is my opinion."

"But I have won my money, so hand it over, and I will see you again after you have had a talk with your chief, so write to him to come back as soon as he can, and not wait the usual time."

"Thank you, this is right, just five hundred—we part here, for my trail leads over the mountain—good-by, old schoolfellow," and the Giant General turned off the trail they were following, while Yankee Kit called after him:

"Good-by, pard; we will soon know, for I shall write the chief to-day."

Having gone on for half a mile the Giant General turned his horse into a thicket among a number of boulders, and dismounting, calmly sat down on the side of the trail, but hidden from view by a rock.

He had not waited very long before he moved, for the sound of hoof-falls reached his ears.

Soon after Yankee Kit rode into sight, closely watching the trail, and was abreast of him when he was startled by the words:

"Hello, Kit, want to see where I live?"

Yankee Kit was completely upset at being caught, and his face showed it.

"Better go back, for I was merciful to you, Kit, on account of old schoolboy days."

"I never spare a man who tracks me, and if I ever catch you doing it again I will kill you."

"When I wish to see you, I will call at your cabin."

"Come, right-about face, march!"

Yankee Kit had not spoken a word; but he obeyed with alacrity, and retraced his way.

But it was not to his cabin that he went but to the nearest one of the two men who had so opposed the Giant General.

"Quarles, I have come back to have a talk with you," he said, as he dismounted before the cabin.

"All right, cap'n."

"Let us go into a game to kill that Giant General, for he is worth twelve thousand dollars, dead or alive."

"I'm your man, cap'n."

"It will have to be divided between six of us, which will be two thousand apiece."

"All right, Cap, and our revenge."

Satisfied thus far, Yankee Kit rode on to the next man, who had been the avowed foe of the Giant General.

He made the same proposition to him, and upon like terms.

The result was the same, and with a better feeling in his heart at his hope of success, Yankee Kit started for his home.

"I told them six of us, for that will give me eight thousand, and they need not know who else is in the game," he muttered, as though explaining his act to himself.

It was after nightfall when he reached his cabin, but before he slept that night he found a better hiding-place for his box of treasure.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HERCULES AT HOME.

WHEN he felt that there was no longer any danger of being followed by Yankee Kit, the Hercules Highwayman rode on at a rapid pace, and after several miles came to a narrow water-wash between two ridges.

There was a crossing there, a trail often used, and the bottom was filled with water, so that any tracks turning off from the main trail were not noticeable.

Into the water-wash he rode, and after continuing up it for some distance he came out upon a ridge which he followed until it ended in a hill-top.

It was a wild, picturesque spot, with heavy timber and rocks all about it, so that an iron-shod hoof left no track.

There, amid the rocks, was a small cabin, and this appeared to be the home of the Giant General.

Certainly it was a most desolate spot, and one well guarded in its approach.

But after a halt here of a few minutes, and a look into the rudely-furnished cabin, the Giant General took a pair of hoof-mufflers and placed them over the iron shoes of his horse.

Then he led him on up the steep ridge, which grew steeper as he ascended, and at last ended in a chasm which severed the mountain in twain, for far below dashed a torrent.

The chasm was not over twenty-five feet wide, and the upper side rose some ten feet higher, while the top was clad with a thick growth of cedar to the very edge.

Placing his hand to his lips the Giant General gave a long, peculiar, wavering call, and it was promptly answered from across the chasm.

Then some four feet of what was cedar bushes swung away from the edge of the chasm on the further side, exposing a clear space, while a moment after what had appeared to be a dead tree began to bend over, and gradually it did so until the end rested upon the chasm where the Giant General stood.

Though the lower side of the tree had the bark on it, and appeared to be a dead trunk, it was but a make believe, for it was a skillfully-constructed bridge, three feet wide, with a rail on either side, to which bark had been attached.

Across this frail-looking, yet strong structure, the Giant General walked, his horse following as soon as the bridge was relieved of his master's weight.

Then it was seen how with ropes, attached to other trees, and appearing to be vines from the other side of the chasm, and with a rudely-constructed windlass the clever passageway was lowered and raised.

The cedars that bordered the edge were planted in a box, on rollers, and made to resemble earth on the chasm side, yet could be rolled out of and into position.

As the Hercules reached the chasm he was met by an Indian of the Comanche tribe, who had turned the windlass for him.

"The chief greets his brother Red Dog," said the Hercules, and the Comanche seemed glad to welcome the pale-face to his home, for the giant had been absent for several days.

Back among the cedars walked the Hercules, the Indian following with his horse, and then it could be seen that the peak of mountain stood like a monument to itself, for on all sides were precipices it seemed, and that mortal man would have a habitation there, no one would believe.

Among the cedars was a cabin, well-built and roomy, and a log stable for the horses, for the Giant General had three, the others as noble animals as the one he had been mounted on when he visited Yankee Kit.

As it was nearing nightfall, the Comanche built a fire in the cabin and prepared supper, to which the pale-face sat down with his red-skin comrade to partake of, and afterward the two lighted their pipes and smoked in silence for a long time, while the shadows of night began to fall upon the scene.

At last the Hercules spoke and said:

"Red Dog, you have been my friend ever since I saved you from the Texan Vigilantes, and when I found you again a prisoner in Fort M— and released you that night, I little dreamed that the very next night I would be an outlaw and a fugitive from my soldier companions.

"Good luck brought me upon you again, and we are friends unto death; but I believe that we may expect better fortune before long, and seek other scenes where we will not be hunted men."

"The Red Dog is not sad.

"He has no people, only a brother, his white brother here, and with him is his home.

"The Red Dog will go where his white brother, the mighty chief, will go," said the red-skin in a satisfied tone.

"All right, and your white brother will take care of you, go where we may."

"The forests and mountains must be our home, that is certain; but we can go where we are not hunted down, go where we can have hunting and fishing and a home, and when I get more gold we will start together; but somehow I wish to get more gold."

"The mighty chief has gold in plenty."

"No, not yet, for when we are settled far from here, your white brother wishes to go on a long trail alone.

"He wishes to go back to his home in far away Texas and visit the grave of one he loved as he alone can love, and over her, even though she was so cruel as to crush his heart, so cruel as to drive him to madness, to make him a murderer, he will put his gold into one grand monument over her, to her memory."

The Hercules had spoken rather to himself than the Indian, and when he ceased he sprung to his feet with an impatient exclamation, as bitter, fearful thoughts crowded upon him, and entering the cabin, sought his blanket-couch as if to drown haunting recollections in slumber.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ROBBING A CRIPPLE.

THERE were rumors along the Overland that the Mounted Miners were getting bolder, and that the Giant General had committed several daring robberies of late, so that the travelers by stage were in dread of their lives on each run of the coaches.

Then came the rumor that an old enemy of the Giant General, who had once captured him, and then given up the trail, after hearing that the Hercules had escaped from Fort M—, a week before the day appointed for his execution, had again taken to the road to hunt him down.

This daring person, who had once been victor over the terrible Hercules, and who was again on his trail, was none other than a boy, it was said.

The youth was known as Butterfly Billy, and he was a Pony Express Rider, but also did service on the trails against the outlaws who infested them.

Butterfly Billy, rumor had it, was a Texan, and was the especial *protege* of the renowned scout, Buffalo Bill, and these two men, it was said, the robber Hercules really dreaded, and when they took the trail to hunt him down he invariably disappeared from the scene of his crimes.

With wild reports floating about, it was no wonder that travel on the Overland was slight, for no one went by stage who did not find it necessary to do so.

One morning Bob Burt the favorite driver, pulled out of the station which was his starting-

point with a larger list of passengers than was usual.

Among them was a gentleman on crutches, and who said that he had lately been severely wounded in the thigh in an encounter with Indians, but that he was compelled to visit San Francisco on business, and was thus forced to travel.

He was sympathized with by all, and was given the back seat all to himself, while he had brought cushions along to add to his comfort.

Besides this passenger there were three others inside, merchants going through, and a miner who rode on the box with Bob Burt.

They had not gone very far from the station, when Bob Burt suddenly came to a halt.

And no wonder, for as they rounded a large rock in the trail, the spot where Captain Coyote had been halted by the Giant General, the driver beheld an obstacle in the way.

It was a horseman, seated bolt upright in his saddle, and with the morning sunlight flashing back rays from a gorgeous uniform, saber and silver-mounted repeating-rifle.

In a word, the Giant General barred the way of the further progress of the stage.

There he sat, calm, stern-faced, and threatening.

His rifle was held at a ready, and he had uttered but one word:

"Halt!"

"Ther devil hev got us, for it are ther Hercules Highwayman," said Bob Burt.

"Let's fight," suggested the miner.

"Do so if yer wishes ter be wolf-meat in two seconds by grandfather's clock."

"Oh, no, not unless you say fight."

"I don't."

"Well, I has nuthin' ter lose, for I am going back to ther mines dead broke."

The Hercules now came riding forward and called out as he halted just before the leaders:

"Good-morning, Burt; who have you along this fine morning?"

"A few bu'sted merchants, a dead broke miner and a crippled gent bound for 'Frisco."

"That is all?"

"Yes, general."

"No money?"

"Not a cent."

"Ask your friend to dismount, please."

The driver made the request and the miner got down from the box and at the request of the Hercules walked toward him and told his story.

"All right, your whisky-bloated face shows that you are not drunk now because you have no money."

"Go back and mount the box."

"You bet I will," and as the miner disappeared the three merchants came forward.

They were from various towns along the route, had been to the East to buy goods and had little money left, not worth the while of such a splendid looking road-agent.

The Hercules seemed to read in their faces that they told the truth and told them he would not take the little they had left.

Then he ordered them to stand upon one side of the road and called out:

"Now send your other passenger to me, Burt."

"He is lame."

"Send him here!"

There was no doubting this command, and so Bob Burt alighted from the box and helped the cripple out.

Together they came to where the Hercules sat upon his horse, his rifle ready for use.

"I have a fancy to see how you are wounded, sir, so, Burt, undo those bandages."

"Say, Hercules, you know me, and when I say I'll die before I do it, I mean it."

"Yes, you are a man of your word, so I'll excuse you."

"Come here, old whisky-face."

The miner was not complimented by the name, but he obeyed with alacrity, and the Hercules said:

"Now, sir, undo those bandages, so I can see how the gentleman is wounded."

"Oh, sir, it will cause me to bleed to death."

"I'll make you bleed to death if you resist."

"Do as I command you, Whisky."

The miner obeyed, while the man writhed as though with pain and groaned terribly.

"Hand me those bandages."

The miner handed them up to the Hercules.

"Ah! this is good for wounds, sir, for here is a package of bank-notes—yes, and another and another."

"Why I have here quite a little fortune, and I'll take them, for I am sure your wound will trouble you no more."

"Well, I'll be durned, ef thet hain't ther est caper out," said Bob Burt, with a laugh, as he realized that the trick of being wounded was to save the money from capture.

"You are a sly one, general, and no mistake," and the driver walked back and mounted his box.

"Now, sir, I give you just five seconds to get into that coach—go!"

The man would have argued, but he dared not, and he sped like the wind for the coach and sprung in just as a bullet flew by his head.

Bob Burt roared with laughter, in which the merchant and miner joined, the latter gathering up the bandages cast aside in the hope of finding a stray bill left among them.

Even the stern, bitter face of the Hercules wore a smile at the speed of the man who had pretended to be wounded; but only for an instant and then he said in an emphatic tone:

"Go!"

A word to the team from Bob Burt and the coach rolled swiftly on its way once more.

Three miles further on the coach was again brought to a halt.

This time it was the Mounted Miners who barred the way, and as Yankee Kit, heavily masked, rode alongside, his revolver cocked and ready, and his men were seen behind and before the coach, Bob Burt called out in his reckless way:

"Hold on, pard, fer yer is badly left, as ther Giant General has interviewed this outfit to the tune of every dollar in it."

"What?" yelled Yankee Kit in a fury.

"So; he held us up a few miles back, right at the big rock, and if he didn't heal a wounded pilgrim in five seconds by grandfather's clock, I am a sweet-singing liar of the Overland."

"Why, pard, he just found greenbacks that were put on as wound-plasters, and he took 'em along too."

"Is this so?" yelled Yankee Kit, and he addressed those in the stage.

"Yes," answered the merchants in chorus, while the man who had suffered the loss put his head out of the window and said dolefully:

"I can swear to it."

"Well, there is no need to delay you, driver, so go on," and Yankee Kit rode off to one side and the stage rolled on its way once more.

But Yankee Kit dismissed his men, and then went to his cabin in no pleasant humor, while he vowed to at once take vengeance upon the Hercules Highwayman if he could find him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ALLY.

CAPTAIN COYOTE had written to Yankee Kit, whom he addressed as a miner at the station near where his cabin was located, that he would come on the day after the passing over the trail of the man who was carrying his money in the bandages of his leg.

So Yankee Kit had gone to the station to show himself when the coach came in and see if he could pick out his disguised chief from the other passengers.

He soon settled upon an old man as the chief, and knew he was right when the person referred to said that he would remain over at the station for a few days, to see if he could learn anything regarding a long-lost son.

So Yankee Kit returned to his cabin, and soon after dark a knock at his door told him the chief had come.

"Well, Kit, here I am again."

"Yes, chief, and glad to see you; but did no one see you leave the station?"

"No, for I got a cabin some distance off and took supper early, saying I was going to bed."

"As soon as I could I came here; but what news?"

"The worst kind."

"Quick, tell me!"

In a few words Yankee Kit told all about the visit of the Hercules, and what had followed, and his anger rose as Captain Coyote laughed heartily.

"Why, the fellow is grand, and I wish to meet him," he said.

"But this is not all."

"What else?"

"He wishes to join the band, and all but two of the men agreed to it."

"Certainly, he is the very man we want, for he shall be an officer next to you."

Yankee Kit scowled and said:

"There is more to tell."

"Well, out with it, man."

"You remember the man you said was coming through as a cripple?"

"Yes, and had his money in his bandages?"

"You got it?"

No, the Hercules did."

"How in the devil's name did he know it?"
"I don't know, but he knows everything, it seems, and he got that money; but, see here! When I came back to-night I found this note on my table, so it shows that he had a key to open my door, and he wrote it here."

The chief seized the note, and read as follows, written in a bold hand:

"FRIEND KIT:—

"I take the liberty of entering your cabin, to leave you a note.

"You expect the chief daily, and if he votes for me there will be no bar to my becoming the ally of the Mounted Miners, as the vote will be unanimous, as the two who would have voted against me were cut off in the midst of their usefulness by cruel death.

"The fact is, I went to call on them to-day, and there was an exchange of shots between us, which resulted in their death.

"Of course you did not tell them to both be at one cabin, to greet me should I call; but they were there, and the result was as aforesaid.

"I buried them in good style, and left them to rest in peace.

"This cuts your band down to twelve, and thirteen with me, for I must surely be your ally.

"I will call upon you to-night and talk it over, and should the chief have arrived, so much the better.

"Feeling that I have really been one of your command, since the night I initiated myself by robbing the chief, I wish to say that I captured from a cripple to day, in Bob Burt's coach, ten thousand dollars, which shall go into the common treasury.

"Expecting to see you before long,
Yours,
HERCULES,
The Giant General."

"Well, he is a marvel, and I say he shall be our ally," said the chief, and as he spoke there came a tap upon the door.

"Who comes?" called out Yankee Kit.

"Hercules!"
He opened the door and the Giant General stepped in, while the chief eyed him curiously.

"Ah, Kit, glad to see you again, and you, chief, it gives me pleasure to meet once more and under pleasanter circumstances to you than our last meeting."

Captain Coyote at once shook hands with his visitor and returned:

"I am glad to meet you, general, and to thank you for your kindness to me and to my band, when we were all in your power.

"Let me also say that you are now an officer in my band of the Mounted Miners."

And thus it was that the Giant General won his wish and became the ally of the Mounted Miners, for he still held aloof from them to some extent, never allowing them to know where his lone cabin was situated.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

So great became the dread along the Overland Trails of the Mounted Miner Outlaws, and the Giant General, that the military was sent to run them down.

But, it fell to the lot of two men to track the Soldier Hercules to his lair on the ridge, though his secret retreat further on was not found.

These two were Butterfly Billy, a Pony Express Rider from Texas, and Buffalo Bill, the famous scout.

They had tracked the Hercules to his ridge cabin, Butterfly Billy playing the part of an Indian, and when he demanded the surrender of the dreaded Hercules, the revolvers of both men cracked together, and both fell.

Buffalo Bill came quickly to the rescue, and found the Hercules motionless as death, while Butterfly Billy was severely wounded.

The Hercules was buried where he fell, while the scout mounted the wounded Pony Rider upon his horse and carried him by slow marches to Fort M—where, for a long time, he hovered between life and death.

But at last he rallied and recovered, to find himself a hero for having slain the most dreaded highwayman ever known upon the border trails.

And more: the gallant young Texan's name became famous from one end of the Overland to the other, where he served as a Secret-Service Agent, and won the sobriquets of "The Black Horse Detective," "The Mounted Shadow,"—"The Rogue's Recruiting Sergeant," as indicative of the mission he fulfilled.

THE END.

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